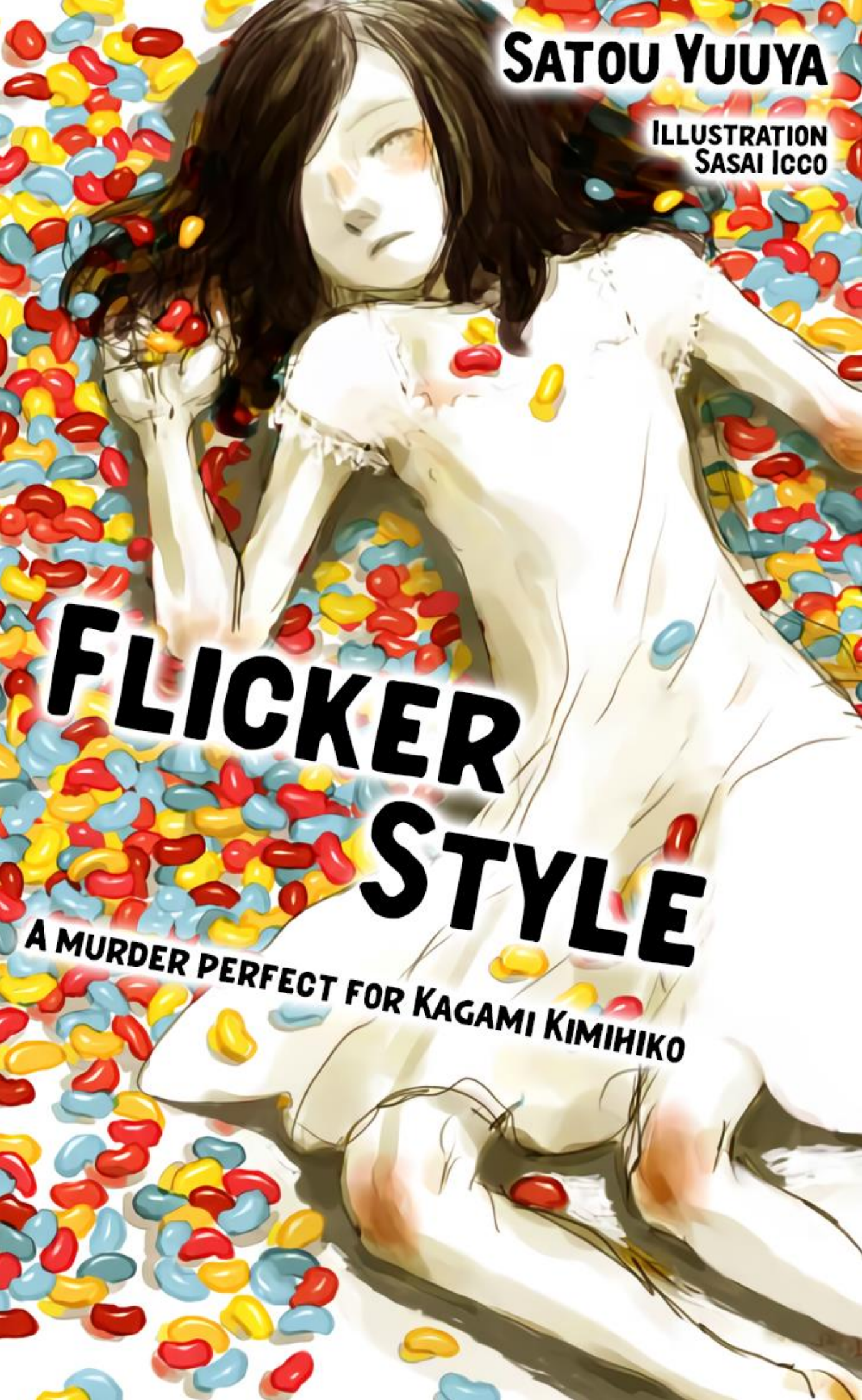
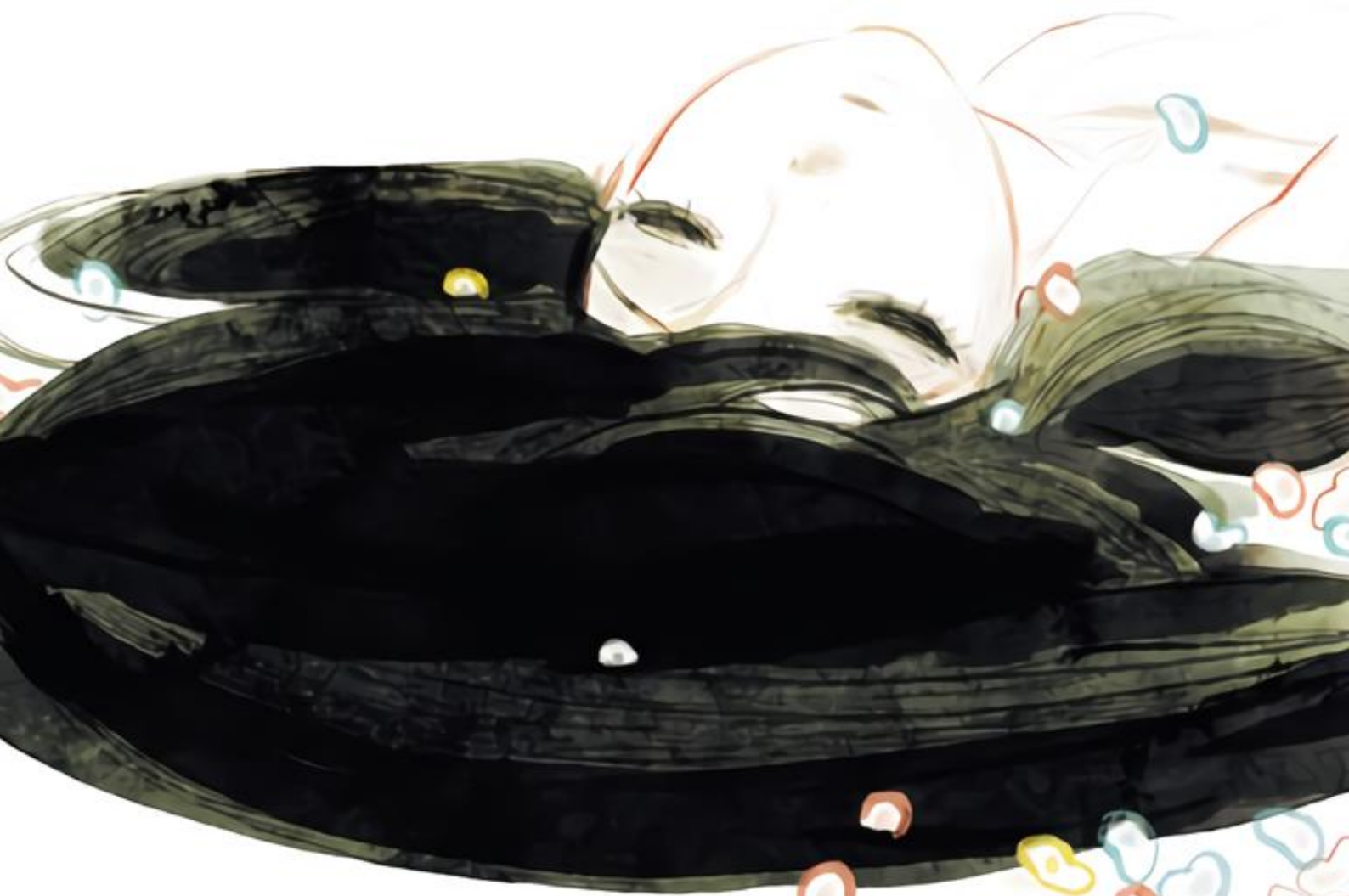

Satou Yuuya
Illustration
Sasai Icco
Flicker Style
A Murder Perfect for Kagami Kimihiko



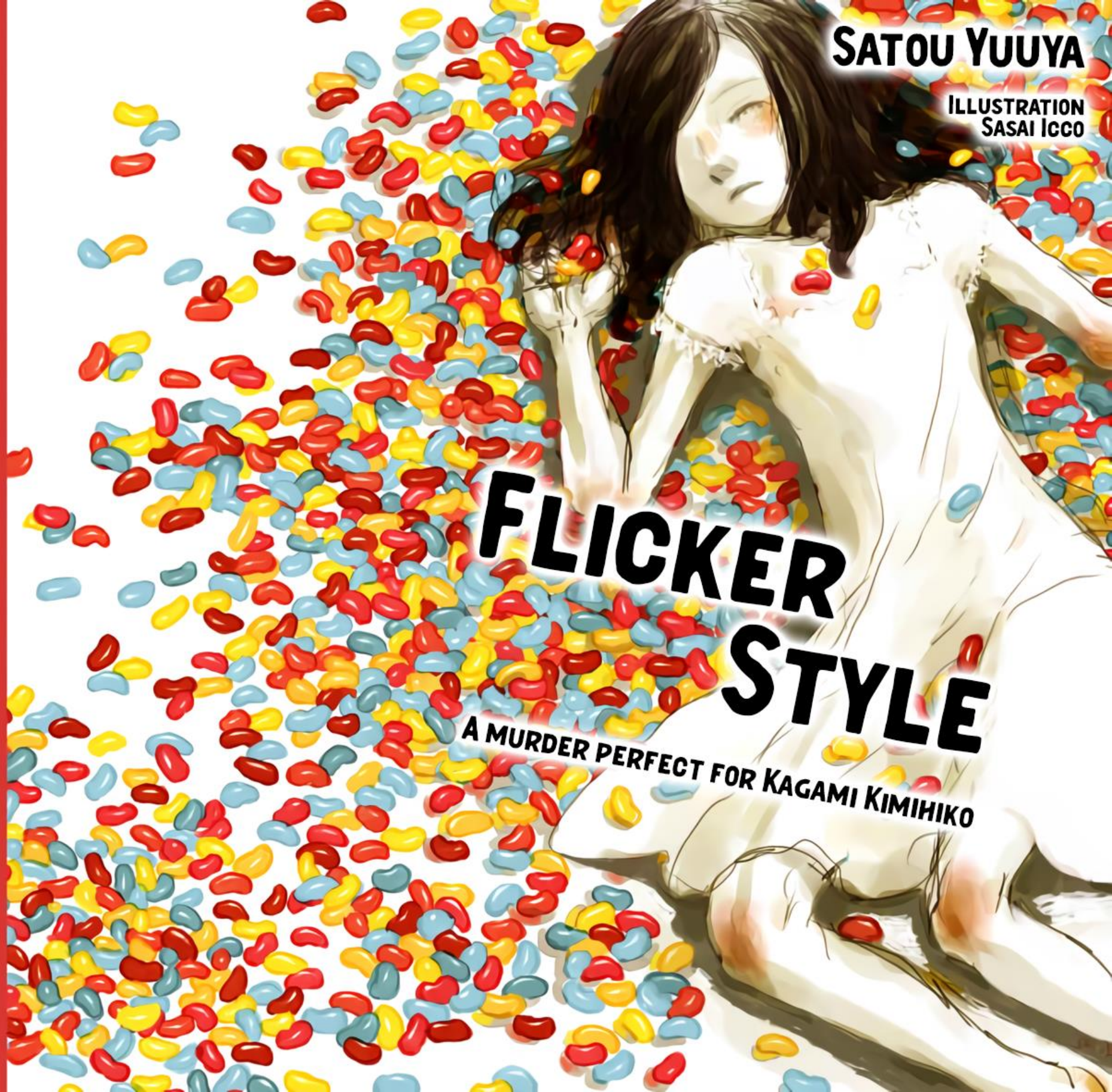
FLICKER STYLE

A MURDER PERFECT FOR KAGAMI KIMIHIKO

SATOU YUUYA

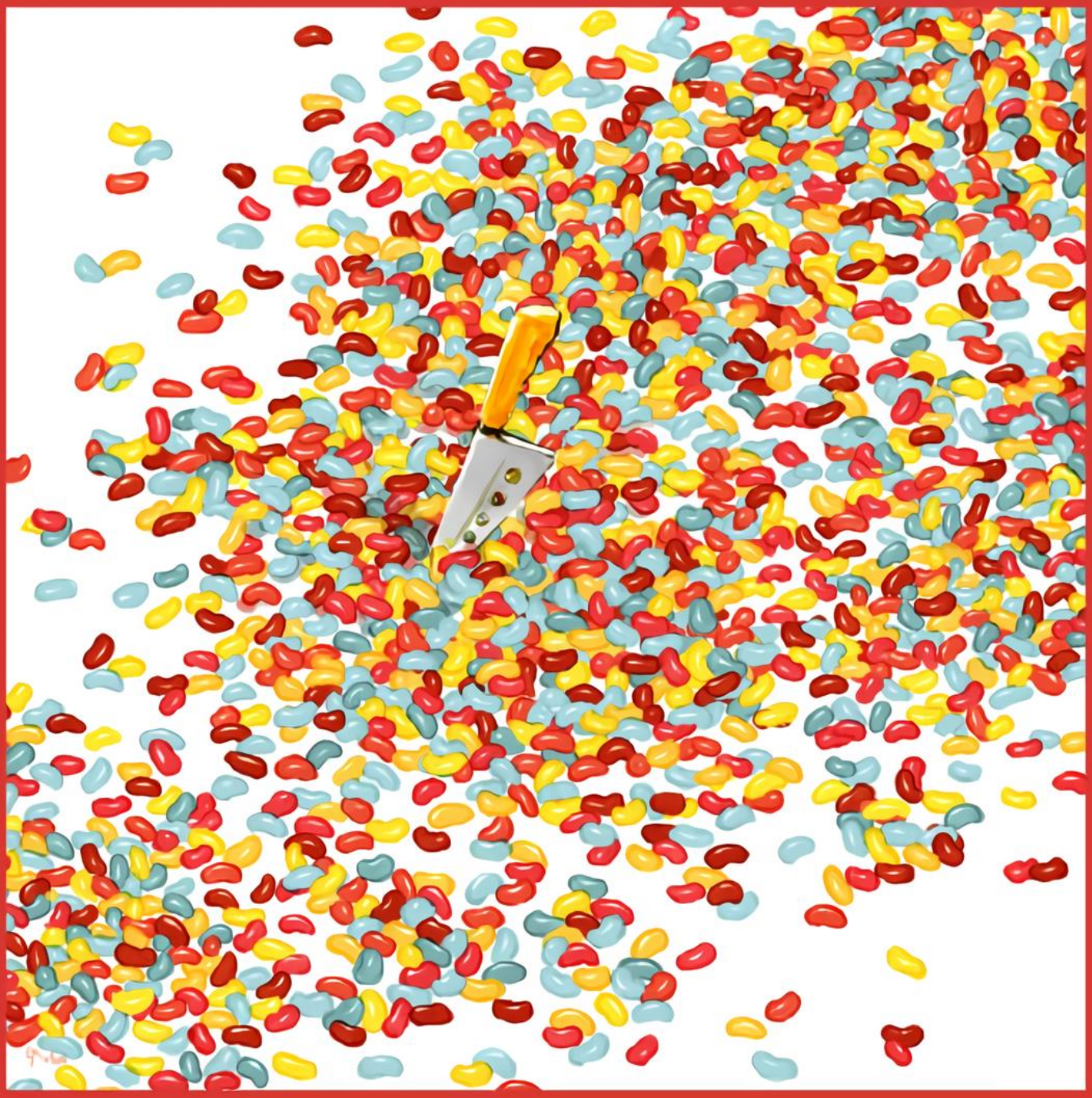
Art BY SASAI ICCO

This book is perfect for people who say "Ahh! Onii-cha~n" (JK).



Flicker Style

A murder perfect for Kagami Kimihiko



Chapter 1: Start by Pulling Its Leg

Chapter 2: Do Not Act Carelessly

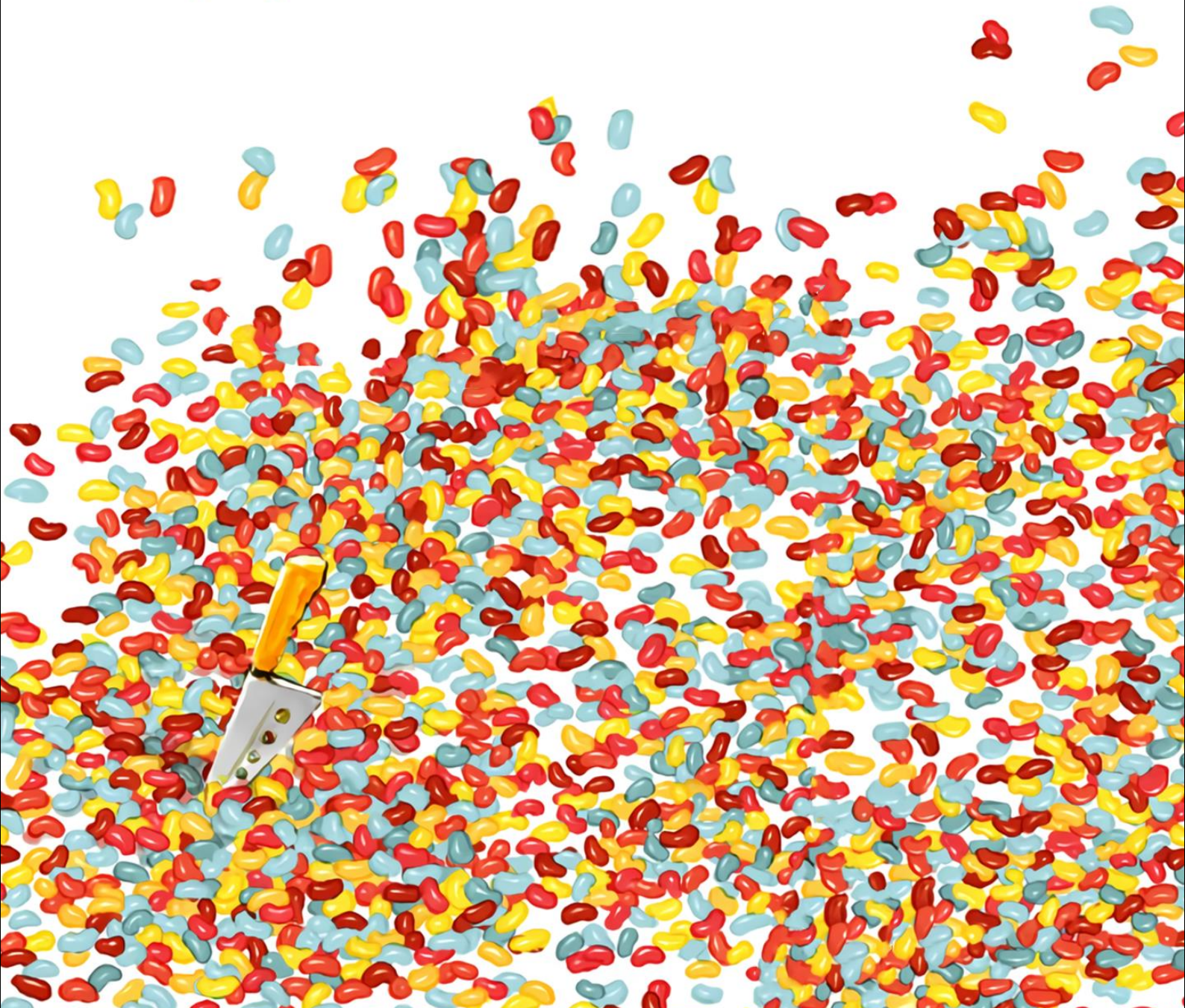
Chapter 3: Still Do Not Look At It

Chapter 4: I Tried Getting It Wrong

Chapter 5: I Tried Putting Up a Front

Chapter 6: I Tried Putting the Pieces Together

Epilogue



“Hey, Main Character.”
Zuigan would call to himself every day.
“Yes?”
He would ask back.
“Don’t get fooled.”
“I know. I know.”

—From *Gankan Shujin*, Mumonkan.

Start by Pulling Its Leg

1

Surprisingly, a lot of people would use the words ‘weak’ and ‘pessimistic’ to describe the act of looking back at the past or the feeling of being nostalgic. And yet, nobody can resist the temptation of doing so themselves.

That’s why I want to start by talking about the day engraved in my memory as the last moment of bliss in my life.

Hopefully that will help mitigate the sense of abnormality you might feel from me or my surroundings.

July 29th.

Summer in Hokkaido.

A blazing sun.

The last Sunday of July.

That day, Sana came by to visit my apartment.

“Onii-chan, yop!” Using her spare key, Sana didn’t waste a second to enter my bedroom and disrupt my peaceful slumber. “Wake up, wake up! Look, it’s already noon. The sun is high-up in the sky. C’mon, wake up, wake up, wake uuuup,” she insisted while rocking the towel-blanket in which I was wrapped like sushi.

“I’m up…” I reluctantly awoke. My head and eyelids felt heavy. I wouldn’t call myself a sleepyhead, but one couldn’t best low blood pressure. “I’m awake, so sorry but could you shut up for a bit?”

“I will, but only if you actually get up,” Sana’s anime-like, coy voice echoed inside my head. “So hurry up and get out of bed. You need some smithing done to get sharper.”

“Sharp?”

“Yes, sharp. Come on, come out of there. Don’t you find it a waste to sleep through a Sunday?”

“I don’t,” I answered from within the blanket.

“Sundays are when you’re supposed to have fun.”

“Wrong, Sundays are sleep days.”

“Geez. When did you turn into an old man?”

“What time is it?”

“Now I’m mad,” Sana gave my belly a chop. “Don’t ask questions and get up. It’s 9 AM by the way.”

“Ouch,” I popped my face out of the blanket. The overbearing sun rays and light breeze coming from the open window threw my mind in mayhem. My eyes hurt from the unaccustomed light. I reflexively squinted. “...Um, could I ask you two things?”

“Which are?” Sana asked, gleeful. “Anything, as long as it’s not closing the window or letting you sleep more.”

“Could you prepare breakfast?”

“I will if you get up.”

She stole the blanket off of me.

“Okay, okay...” I resigned. I sluggishly rose out of bed while rubbing my hurting eyes. “I surrender,” I shouted, then took out clothes from my broken closet. Sana was still standing behind me, the blanket in hand.

“Hey, get out.”

“You’re so bashful, Onii-chan.” Sana covered her head with the blanket. A blue Q-Taro ghost. “I can’t see you with this on, feel free to change.”

...I could only feel a crappy freedom.

I still changed clothes. That’s what I always did. Against Sana, I would either surrender or compromise at the slightest pushback. Even if Sana were to cut one of my fingers off, I bet I would forgive her with a simple apology. And despite the long runtime I’d spent on fixing that error in my program, that process still wasn’t over.

I was too soft on my little sister...but why?

I had a vague reason in mind.

And our family’s situation played a great role in it.

There is one thing I could confidently assert: Our wonderful Kagami family was broken.

The eldest daughter, the eldest son, the second son, the second daughter, and the fourth daughter were all broken beyond repair. Only Sana and I were normal. Obviously, the notions of 'normal' and 'broken' don't mean much by themselves, but these indicators make up for 80% of the danger felt when thinking of someone. Though that played no role here.

I turned back, now wearing the set I'd bought second-hand for a total of 3200 yen, and Sana was still wearing the blue Q-Taro.

"You can remove that now, Sana."

"So hhhhot in there!" She ousted the blanket away with much vigor. "See? Good thing I opened that window," she giggled. The light coming from the wide-open window caressed her cheeks.

Sana was clad in Miu Miu clothes today. I bet she begged mom to buy them as usual. She was worlds apart from me and my priciest item, a Nike shirt I got for 7500 yen during a sale (by the way, in the family, our mom had no qualms about discriminating between men and women when it came to requests).

"...Is something wrong, Onii-chan?" Sana calmly asked. She must've been puzzled by the looks I gave her.

"Nothing."

"Weird Onii-chan."

"Sorry for that. I know, I'm weird. Though I'm saying that a posteriori."

"Still sleepy, huh."

Sana threw the blanket she was still holding onto the bed.

"Sleepiness doesn't go away that fast."

"Then how about you go take a jog?"

"You still have to prepare breakfast, okay? Keep your promise."

"I will even do your laundry."

"Really?"

"I kinda feel like your wife."

"Huh?"

"I'm borrowing your kitchen," Sana said and hurried to the kitchen.

I figured I should start by closing the window.

I looked at the outside scenery. A blue sky. Neighboring apartments. The sound of cars passing by. A three-legged stray dog. Kids on a Sunday. An average world that doesn't permit anyone to dream that it would last forever. I locked the window, then turned the AC on. Fuck you.

2

I entered the kitchen to find Sana in the midst of battle. She was wearing an apron red like Mario's hat. I took a mini bottle of Pocari Sweat (bought) from my comically large fridge (picked up on the street) that wouldn't feel out-of-place whatsoever in an American drama TV set.

"Hold on...since when can you cook?"

I peeked over her shoulder. She was cutting (I guess 'butchering' would be a more apt description) some vegetables. The legs protruding out of her knee-length skirt were jolting at a steady pace for some reason. She looked like a kid dead-set on proving they were an adult. Not like a first year high school student, at least.

"Onii-chan!" Sana lamented in a voice mixed with anger and sorrow. "You haven't been sharpening your knife, have you?"

"Nope."

"It can't even cut a carrot." Sana turned back and stuck out the knife in question for me to see. Not even minding my safety. "If it couldn't handle tendons or pumpkins, I could understand, but carrots are way over the line. Come on, they are freaking carrots!"

"Yeah," I opened the mini bottle, "that one's only able to cut cotton candy."

"It better be able to!"

"Calm down."

"Don't you have a better one?" she sounded done with me. "This one broke my dreams."

“As if I…oh, hold on, I totally do. …But first, put that knife down, it’s dangerous.” I ran my hands through the shelf above the range. I felt something. “Mn, that might be it.” Bingo. It was a perforated knife still in its packaging. A cute one with a yellow handle. The one that showed up all the time in TV shopping programs.

“Why do you have that?” Sana put a hand up to her mouth and laughed. “Did you get possessed to buy it?”

“I won it in a lottery.”

“Nice, I’ll use it then.”

She pulled out the knife from my hands.

“Make sure to wash it first.”

“Say, Onii-chan.”

Sana’s voice suddenly changed entirely in tonality. It had way more weight than two seconds prior. That was her prized technique since she was an infant.

“…What?”

I readied myself. The Pocari bottle in my mouth. I couldn’t taste anything.

“What would be your biggest misfortune, Onii-chan?”

“Huh?”

I didn’t get what she was going for.

“Just answer. What would be your biggest misfortune?”

“Is that a psychological test?”

“Hurry up and answer.”

Crap, it started bulging. Sana’s right cheek did, of course. I wouldn’t do that, even in the morning.

“Don’t ask stuff like that all of a sudden, it’s hard to answer…” I pondered. My biggest misfortune, my biggest misfortune, my biggest misfortune… “Erm, let me see… Ah, my Telecast breaking might be it.”

That’s how I called my guitar (though the official name was Telecaster). It’s the one people like Nakamura Koji or Mukai Shutoku used as their main guitar. The people who get it will get it.

“Would your guitar breaking be your biggest misfortune?” Sana’s eyes were full of disappointment. “Give me a proper answer. I’m asking seriously here.”

“Rude. How much do you think that guitar cost me? It’s not a Fender Japan one, okay? Mine is a Danny Gatton, an authentic one from Ameri—”

“I’m not asking this as a joke.”

Indeed, she didn’t look like she was telling a joke or testing me. But why was she so serious? I still had no idea why she had started this.

“Listen, you can’t ask stuff like this and expect an answer on the spot.” So I answered that. “Of course it would be a family member dying or that kind of thing.”

“You’re saying that when you didn’t even come to the second anniversary of Onee-chan’s death?”

Sana took the knife out of its packaging. Nothing can compare to the glint on a brand new, 70/30 knife.

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Yes.”

“…”

“Onii-chan, are you angry?”

“…”

“Please…”

“Is there any meaning behind that question?” I wasn’t really heated. “I mean, what do you want to know through that question?”

“Your resolve.”

“My what?”

“Your resolve, so I know how tough you can be when faced with your biggest misfortune. Onii-chan…prepare yourself for something on the level of having your guitar broken, then.”

Her voice was awfully gloomy.

Then, my broken doorbell informed us of a visitor. Leaving my mini bottle and Sana behind in the kitchen, I headed for the entrance.

I opened the door.

“Morning.”

The visitor’s identity was my childhood friend and classmate, Asumi. She was holding a grocery bag and a pouch.

“Oh, it’s you…”

“Were you sleeping, Kimihiko-kun?”

“Mm?”

“I mean, you still look half-asleep.”

She swayed her shoulder-length hair.

“Shut up.”

“Oh my,” she was looking at Sana’s sandals. “You had someone over? Sorry. I guess I shouldn’t be here…”

“Ooh, Asumi-san.” Sana ran up to us, still wearing her apron. Luckily, she wasn’t holding the perforated knife. “Good morniiing. Long time no see.”

“Morning.” Asumi smiled at Sana. “Were you paying a visit to your brother?”

“Yes, as his wife.”

“Color me jealous.”

“Can you put a stop to this nonsense?”

I glared at Sana.

“Eeek,” she rubbed her eyes and pretended to cry. “Onii-chan is a bully… This is domestic abuse…”

“So, what are you here for?” I didn’t care for roundabout politeness. “I’m not gonna help with your reports anymore. Because of them, last week I—”

“…Ah, it’s not for that,” she raised the grocery bag up to her chest. That was, of course, not to brag about her strength. “I wanted to thank you for that.”

“Thank me?”

“You said your meals always came from the freezer, didn’t you? So I thought I could prepare you something today.”

“Woah, aren’t you glad, Onii-chan?” Sana had removed her apron before I knew it. When? “Now you can bid farewell to malnutrition. For today, at least.”

“Sana…”

“Only Asumi-san would care for you to that extent,” she said as she turned on her heels before escaping at a speed that made me wonder if she hadn’t been Alice’s bunny or The Flash on drugs in a past life, followed by a ruckus echoing from the kitchen.

“What took over Sana-chan?” Asumi looked confused.

“Just between us, these clothes don’t fit Sana at all,” I whispered to her. “Oh, come in, and sorry for the mess. Isn’t it hot today? So much for being in Hokkaido.”

“Ah, yeah. Then I’m barging in.”

“Feel free to.”

We headed to the kitchen. There were no remnants of carrots, not even the perforated knife there.

“Woah, it’s so cramped.”

“Shut up.”

“Kimihiko-kun, do you like sweet-and-sour pork?”

“The food, maybe. The name, not so much.”

“I will take that for a yes.” She took out an apron from her pouch. Jeez, was it National Apron Day today? “Then I’ll pour all I have into this…wait, do you have a knife or a cutting board?”

“I have a knife that cannot cut anything, if you want. Want me to sharpen it?”

“No need, I brought one myself. Are your frying pans teflon?”

“Pentathlon what?”

“It won’t be done for a good while, you can sleep some more.”

Asumi was looking at me with a fed-up face.

“Tsk, I told you I wasn’t sleeping. Want me to help with anything?”

“Nope, I’ll do it all by myself.”

There was no reason for me to stay inside the kitchen after her refusal, so I returned to my bedroom.

Sana was standing in the middle of the room.

Her red apron and my blue blanket in a heap at her feet.

"Um, just to check, you're not mad, are you?"

"As if," Sana was smiling in her eyes. She was smiling, and yet... "Why would I be mad?"

"I mean, you know..."

"What is Asumi-san cooking?"

"Sweet-and-sour pork."

"Oh..." Sana looked up. As if she had spotted an angel that even the boy who'd pointed out the king was naked had missed.

"It's a defeat, then."

"For whom?"

"Me, obviously. Can't you tell?"

"You know, it doesn't matter who wins or loses. Seriously."

I stared at Sana. She interrupted her angel contemplation and met my gaze in an awkward fashion.

"Onii-chan, you're in a bad mood, aren't you?"

"...Don't you actually have something you wanna say to me?"

"Why do you think that?"

"I mean, you brought up Yuna-nee-san, and erm...that thing about my biggest misfortune."

"That one was just a joke," she replied in a voice lacking her usual sweetness and boisterousness, but instead infused with a timbre to confuse me. "I simply wanted to be with you."

That was a lie. Even if it wasn't, it was far from being the truth.

But, being the despicable coward I was, that answer satisfied me.

I took a step forward.

I then patted Sana's head.

She gently closed her eyes, like a purring kitten would.

We sometimes did this.

We eventually heard lunch was ready, so we went and ate it. Asumi's sweet-and-sour pork didn't use pineapple.

That was the last moment of bliss engraved in my memory.

3

I had a dream where I killed Sana.

Even on the first Sunday of August, I was still enjoying becoming a sushi in my blanket. However, the melody from King Crimson's *Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part Two* cut that short and forced me out of my half-assed slumber.

"...Yeah, who is it?" I brought my outdated phone to my ear. "Anyone?" I sounded cross.

"..."

However, even after waiting for a good while, the person on the other end didn't say anything. But I could tell there was someone on the line... Aah, fuck, a prank call this early in the morning?

No, maybe it was...

"Hello? Is anyone here?"

"Ah...Kimihiko?" It was my mom. For some reason her voice was slightly—but undoubtedly—shaking, like a hamster's back. "Hello, it's mom, can you hear me?"

"Yeah." I repressed a yawn. "I can hear you just fine."

"I see. Good, then." I could hear her letting out small sighs intermittently. "Have you been doing well? I hope you're not sick or anything."

"Yeah, I'm good. Haven't gotten anything." But I bet my voice stiffened ever so slightly when I answered that. "Is something wrong? They say no news is good news, but you haven't been—"

"Kimihiko...did I wake you up? Your voice is still cracking."

"Eh?"

“Can you hear me? Your voice is still cracking. Hello?” It looked like mom was not so stable today. “Kimihiko, it’s ten o’clock, you know? I know it’s a Sunday but you shouldn’t sleep like a log on—”

“Mom,” I gripped the phone tighter. I was certain of it now. “Something happened, right?”

An eerie silence.

“What?” she responded after a delay.

“Something happened, right?” I repeated. “What is it?”

“What is what?”

“Do you have ears? ...Don’t make me repeat myself so much.” I wasn’t the most patient guy. “I asked you if something had happened. A few times, even.”

“...Aah,” mom finally seemed to have realized. “Yes, something happened, apparently.”

“Apparently?”

“No...sorry. No. Yes, something happened.”

She was broken.

My mom, who looked at people lacking in empathy with marvelous contempt, was broken.

“So, what is it?”

“Kimihiko, have you been eating vegetables? You never ate tomatoes as a child so I’m worried...”

“Could you not change the topic like that?” I was surprised. “I’m asking you what happened. Did someone break into the house?”

“We don’t have jewelry in the house.”

“Did Nee-san break?”

“Don’t jinx it.”

“Then what is it?”

I insisted. My lips were dry.

“What is what?” She wasn’t playing dumb. She was trying to be serious. “What happened, Kimihiko? Did you need something?”

“You’re the one who called me, are you not? Come on, can you tell me what—”

“What are you talking about?!”

She suddenly screamed.

Woah, this might be bad.

In many ways.

“Okay… I’m sorry. Calm down. Take your time.” I whispered, as if I was telling it to myself. Some cold sweat was starting to roll down my back. All sleepiness was gone from my mind. “Calm down.”

“Ah…yes.” Her breathing was rough. “I’m sorry. You are right. That wasn’t right of me. Really. What happened to me? I wonder. That is rare.”

“Mom,” I said firmly, “What happened? Please, tell me.”

Only a distant silence passed through the phone line for a good while. However, time never stops. After 30 seconds of hesitating like a cowardly olympic diver, she delivered in a strangely calm voice:

“Sana died.”

“Huh?”

“Well…Sana died. Didn’t you hear me? I said it clearly.”

She sounded a bit angry.

“Sana… What is that supposed to mean?”

“Kimihiko, you don’t believe me, do you?”

“Of course I do,” I hurriedly corrected myself. “Umm, so Sana…err, died, is that right?” I asked as confirmation. “And you are sure?”

“Yes. She died. Without a doubt.”

“Erhm…when did it happen?”

My heart rate was stupidly high.

“When? Um…I don’t know the exact time.”

“How did she die?”

“Kimihiko, have you learned to eat your tomatoes now? Ah, that reminds me, if you sprinkle sugar on tomatoes—”

“Could you answer my question, mom?”

“Question? What is it?”

“How did Sana die? The cause of death. Was it an accident?” I didn’t realize how fast I was speaking. “Like, was she hit by a car, or did she fall off a bridge? Or…was she killed?”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” She then used words that would never have crossed my mind as if they were nothing.“It was a suicide.”

Suicide.

“Su…”

Suicide?

Sana had committed suicide?

What kind of joke was that?

“Are you okay Kimihiko? You’re not saying anything.”

“So Sana…”

“Eh?”

“So Sana committed suicide?”

I put my thoughts into words.

“She did.”

“That can’t…”

That unexpected fact confused me like nothing before.

I almost dropped my phone out of surprise.

Suicide.

Sana had committed suicide.

Why?

“I am telling the truth. She hanged herself.”

“Hanged?” I shrieked. Sana had hanged herself? I couldn’t believe it. There was no way I could. “H-han…”

“She even wrote a will.”

…A will.

That was decisive.

She really had committed suicide.

Suicide.

Suicide.

No way.

No way.

I couldn't believe it.

"You're lying…"

"Huh? I couldn't hear you?"

"Anyway, I'm heading there. Tell me the details later."

"You're coming over? Now?"

Mom sounded weirdly happy.

"Yeah."

"But what about school?"

"Priorities. Also, it's summer vacation."

I hung up.

A suffocating silence assaulted me. That's how phones work, they only make you aware of them after accomplishing their role.

I tossed my phone away and looked out of the window. There was no meaning to this. If I had to justify it, maybe I wanted to get some of my everyday life back. A blue sky. Neighboring apartments. The sound of cars passing by. A three-legged stray dog. Kids on a Sunday. An average world shining in through the window. …Average, you say? Fuck off!

I dressed up, turned the AC off, stuffed my wallet in my pockets, rushed out of the apartment, and took off with my car.

Such a god-awful Sunday.

4

20 minutes later, I arrived at my beloved family house.

I didn't hesitate a second and opened the door. The windows were all closed, so it was not only dim inside, but also hot like a sauna. In my vision was a familiar living room. Familiar carpet. Familiar walls. A familiar clock. A familiar TV. Right…everything *should* be familiar.

So why did it feel so off?

“Kimihiko…”

Mom was sitting at the table we got for 6700 yen at a local furniture store, leaning on it.

“Woah,” I jumped 30 centimeters off the ground out of surprise. “Say something if you were there. Seriously, it’s bad to scare people like that.”

“I did. Just now.”

Ugh, that voice…

“What’s the deal, are you perfecting the art of being gloomy?” I slid the living room’s curtains open. However, the current mood couldn’t be fixed by mere sunlight. “I’ve been wanting to point out that bad habit of yours since forever.”

“That didn’t take long. So why did you come?”

My mom’s illuminated visage was done for. Like the morning of the third day following the nuclear detonations.

“What do you mean, why…” I wanted to laugh in her face, but decided against it since it wasn’t worth becoming rude over. “For Sana, what else?”

“Sana, Sana… Oh. She should be at her club activities.”

Apparently mom had lost her schedule.

“Didn’t Sana die? You said that on the phone, didn’t you? Or what, was it someone else?”

“Died…”

Her gaze rose to the ceiling as her eyes swam like tropical fish in their element.

“You told me Sana had committed suicide over the phone, right? Do you remember doing that?”

“Have you heard, Kimihiko,” she wasn’t even attempting to look in my eyes. “Sana went to that regional tournament and—”

“I know. She finished third.”

“Oh my…how do you know?”

“She told me herself,” I wasn’t wasting time in answering. “Two months ago.”

My mom was probably done for. Worst case scenario, she might end up in the repair ward (fancy name for prison). And she’d leave us in a yellow ambulance.

I sighted and, almost immediately, heard footsteps coming from the second floor.

“Huh, is there someone up there?”

I looked up at the lightly stained ceiling.

“Yes. Ryouko arrived earlier.”

“Nee-san did?”

Even among the Kagami family, where madness greatly prevailed, Ryouko was one of the fiercest examples. However, lately (I guess the saying ‘the older, the wiser’ is pretty true) she hasn’t been making many waves. …Which made me all the more apprehensive. The silence before the storm…

“My, I need to start preparing dinner,” she said, and yet didn’t try to make any movement. “You will stay for dinner, right?”

“No, I’ll eat out today…”

“I have so much to do today. I must make enough for you, Naomi, Sana, Ryouko, and your dad.”

“See you later, mom.” I decided to go talk to my sister. She might be crazy, but at least she wouldn’t be as bad as mom in her current state. “Take care.”

Mom was still staring at the ceiling. I ignored her and went up the stairs to the second floor. Each room on the second floor was attributed to one of the Kagami family’s seven siblings. At first there was a room dedicated to storing books and one unused, but when my parents—exhibiting an exceptional fertility rate for our era—gave birth to Sana and Naomi, those were overridden and disappeared.

I opened the first door on the right, which was leaning about 30 degrees diagonally, and set foot inside Sana’s wide bedroom. In the end, I only had the chance to visit it a few times.

Ryouko was sitting on her knees in the center of the room. My almost-28-year-old sister was wearing a modest dress. She was fiddling with her long, wavy, black hair.

That description on its own paints her as a beautiful and intelligent woman, but in reality…

"Yo, Nee-san," I raised my right hand and waved at her. "Been a while…"

"I knew you would come."

She threw a glance at me. Looking at me as coldly as ever… Actually, all women of the Kagami family—with the exception of our mother—had eyes that could at the very least make someone think they were being looked at coldly. Sana was no exception to that, naturally.

"Oh, you changed your perfume?"

"Stop it," she replied immediately. "Don't talk about that."

"…The heck are you doing? Is it fun sitting in the middle of the room?"

Let sleeping dogs lie. I changed the topic.

"I came here expecting to find some mementos, but there's just nothing. That sister of ours was so stingy, I swear."

"What did you expect? Seriously, what did you think you were gonna retrieve from a high schooler?" I replied sharply, then suddenly remembered something and looked at the small bookshelf in the corner of the room. "Isn't there that *Let's Head to the Tokyo Star* manga?[1] You said you've wanted it for a while, so…"

"I already took it." There was a large bag next to her. The gleam on its surface gave it a retro feeling reminiscent of leather backpacks. "Tell me, do you know who Joker-sensei is?[2]"

"Nee-san…"

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[1] A three-volume manga by Shirakumi Yumi.

[2] He is part of the (self-proclaimed) secret society Unit.Yakuri (Yakuri Kyoushitsu; 薬理凶室 in Japanese), a regroupement of science vulgarization authors writing under a common nickname. The group debuted in 1998 in the magazine *Abunai 28th*, then had no activity until 2004, when their first book, *The Introduction to Mad-Science*, got published by Sansai Books and turned into a series. Nowadays, they are more known for their *Impossible Science* series, their videos on Youtube, and their role as supervisors for the manga *Dr. Stone*.

I sat across from her. I took a few deep breaths. A slimmer of sweat was forming on my face.

"What is it?"

She extended her legs and twirled her ankles.

"Sana died."

I glanced at Sana's desk. It was a mess with textbooks, manga, and coffee cups lying around.

I then spotted a small jar stuffed with colorful jelly beans buried among her homework sheets.

"What are you looking at?" Nee-san turned around and followed my gaze. "Oh, jelly beans. Gee, I can't believe she still ate those," she said, genuinely disgusted. No wonder, she'd always hated additives. "What was she trying to do by ingesting all that poison, I wonder."

"Beats me."

"Right, where were we again?"

"Come on…" I sighed. "Sana's death."

"I hadn't actually forgotten."

"Do you think it really was a suicide?" I initiated the topic that irked me. "Have you heard anything, Nee-san? Mom's already broken like a gramophone from the 20s'…"

"Yes, yes! A suicide!" She slammed the floor with her hand. Only someone arrogant…or a self-punishing masochist would do that in this situation. "I can't make a shred of sense out of it. It's like putting the cart before the horse."

"Huh, are you angry? Also, that expression makes no sense here."

"I don't need your understanding."

"Heh."

"Still…the fact it was suicide is the most shocking thing in this case. And here I thought she was the least likely to kill herself in this family," she said like she was leaving a comment in the miscellaneous section of *Tokyo Sports*. "Or maybe she wanted to decide how her own life would end herself?"

“Isn’t she imitating Nee-san, rather?”

Having judged I wouldn’t hear anything useful from my sister past this point, I consciously instilled some stimulation into the discussion. By the way, the ‘Nee-san’ just now referred to the eldest daughter Yuna who’d committed suicide three years ago.

“Sana didn’t care for her to that extent. She’s not like me.” She joked self-deprecatingly, something rare for her to do. She then brushed her bangs to the side and glared at me with sharp eyes. “Kimihiko, are you that interested in reading Sana’s will?”

“Yeah.” Nee-san was a shaman or something along those lines, so I wasn’t surprised by her reading me like this. “I really wanna.”

“I guarantee it would be better for you not to see it.”

“Did you read it yourself?”

“But if that doesn’t stop you, I’ll share it with you.”

“You even have it?”

“You really can’t shut your mouth, huh. So, what? You’ll read it or not?”

“I will.”

Obviously. I had to check the proof that Sana had killed herself. That was my duty.

Nee-san took out a sheet of paper from her retro bag, explained this was the copy of a copy they got from the police, and handed it to me.

I waited for my heart rate to return to normal before opening it. However, it only read ‘Sorry’ and ended there. It might be the simplest and shortest will to ever exist. I felt my expectations get betrayed. Nee-san was right, I was better off not seeing this.

“Is that all?”

She nodded.

“What the fuck,” I stared at the sheet of paper in my hands. I checked the back just in case, but it was just blank. “That doesn’t tell…”

“Time for Shiho-chan’s news.[3] The police visited earlier and told me Sana was found around noon on the third of this month,” my sister, who would never explain anything if asked, started explaining without anyone asking. “In the park behind the house, the uhh…”

“Elephant Park?”

“That one,” she subtly nodded. “That name sounds like Eggplant.”

“Not at all. So, what happened at Elephant Park?”

“She was found dead, hanged with a rope, in the toilets there. Mom contacted the police after noticing Sana hadn’t come back late in the night, and one of the dispatched officers found her.”

“Noon on the third…so it took a good while before I got the word.”

By the way, today was August fifth.

“That’s obviously because mom didn’t contact anyone. Even I only got informed today.”

“When did she die exactly?”

“Why would you want to know?”

She threw me a dubious look.

“I mean, there’s no real reason…”

“Between late at night on the second and early in the morning on the third. That info comes from the police too.”

She whispered an answer, then retracted her legs and sat properly on her knees.

Suicide.

Will.

And hanging.

Those words were provoking chemical reactions (obviously the kind that turns matter more malignant), explosions even, inside my mind and wreaking havoc. My head was in pain. I put a hand up to my temples.

---

[3] The trademark gossip corner of Nagaoka Shiho from the visual novel *To Heart*.

"...Aah, geez, Sana really went ahead and accomplished something pleasant with that suicide." Nee-san was stroking her hair. "It's putting a smile on my face. Pleasant, really pleasant."

"How in hell is that pleasant?"

"Shut your trap. Your voice echoes in my head, it's irritating. I bet you're not aware, are you?"

"I don't know what's wrong with you," I said like a machine gun. "Always the same thing, isn't it? We're talking about Sana's death. What's pleasant about it?"

"I didn't mean it that way, idiot," she retorted in a sharp voice. "Though I bet understanding that will forever remain out of your reach."

"I don't even want to understand. You always do that, disregarding others'—"

"Ah!"

She let out an idiotic yell and stared at me.

Her eyes...were empty.

She continued for a few dozen seconds.

"W-what's wrong? Don't scare me."

"I saw it."

"Huh? I'm pretty sure my zipper's closed."

I still patted my pants to check.

"Not that, stupid." Her voice was cold. "In the near future...you will do something really bad."

"Eh? ...Oh." I finally understood. Her powers that no sane person would believe to be real had manifested. "A prophecy?"

Prophecies.

A dubious and shady word.

And yet, behold, she was right 100% of the time. Haha, that's better than Nostradamus. She would make a ton of money if she worked as a fortune teller for politicians. Ah, I guess that's impossible. Nee-san's prophecies manifest randomly, so she can't see them whenever she wants.

"I'll do something really bad?"

I asked for confirmation.

"Yes."

"You saw that future?"

"Yes."

She nodded, exasperated, and nastily muttered about how these prophecies are a plague for her.

"Really? They seem convenient, though."

"Then try it yourself. You'll see it's not all roses. ...Aah, why was I cursed to see the future..."

"Has no one ever said anything pleasant about your prophecies?"

"Yuna and Souji."

"Huh." That was a first to me. "What did they say?"

"Yuna said," she put on a smile for the first time. Nee-san was always being dragged around by the eldest daughter. "That it was because of a bovine's spell."

"What does that mean?"

"No idea," she shook her head. "And then Souji." Souji is the second son. He was the one who dragged me around. "Souji said that, uhh, what was it again...that it was magic," she said and started laughing.

"That's a damn masterpiece!" I laughed out loud too. "Huh, magic..."

"As if I was Lady Serika.[4]" I didn't get the joke. "Kimihiko, have you talked with mom?"

"Yeah. I couldn't get through her, though," I answered, recalling the disaster from earlier. "It was like talking with a cat without a translator."

"No wonder, she's easy to break."

"Agreed," I acquiesced. "Um, Nee-san, do you know what the 'really bad' thing I'm about to do is, concretely?"

"Want to know?"

---

[4] Kurusugawa Serika from *To Heart*, a girl obsessed with the occult.

"...No thanks, I won't tempt it."

I once again looked at Sana's desk. I wasn't brave enough to know the future.

"Well," Nee-san stood up lazily. "I will return to work," she said and picked up her bag. Apparently it was really heavy.

"Work..."

Nee-san used the term 'work.' Knowing what she was like in the past, I was astonished. I guess she really was calming down.

"Aaaah. Hell is awaiting me, I have to ink everything now."

She lamented and let out a profound sigh. She was working as a doujin artist (though apparently that alone wasn't nearly enough to fully sustain someone). I forgot what her circle's name was (it must not have been that good if it didn't stick to me anyway), but I could never forget their obsession to draw only risky and borderline stuff.

"What are you drawing this time around? Gundam?"

"A Sakura book,[5]" she said and looked at Sana's shelves with sorrowful eyes. Was she going to take more things? "Ugh, Sakura-chan only appeared as a middle schooler for ten panels. And that's if you count the ones where we only see her arms or legs, and the double page spread as two different panels. For Christ's sake...why do all doujin artists think in the same way? I know her younger version already got drawn to death, but still..."

"And who's Sakura-chan?"

"If you knew I'd be threatening you."

"Nee-san, are you going to the wake?"

I asked casually.

She looked down on me.

Her eyes reverted to that of her past self.

A suffering glint.

A maddening glint.

---

[5] Kinomoto Sakura, the protagonist from *Cardcaptor Sakura*.

My brain shuddered.

My spine shuddered.

Then,

“Don’t be stupid.”

A calm rebuke.

“Woah woah, aggressive much?”

I couldn’t hide my confusion. Why was she so mad from the get-go?

“Kimihiko…” There was an infinitesimal pause before her lips moved again. “You love Sana, don’t you?”

Her expression then was so gentle it gave me chills.

“What?” I was flustered. I was ready to feel cold sweat running down my back. I answered while focusing my gaze on Nee-san’s neck. “Looks like you finally went mad, Nee-san. Haha, good for you. Now you can finally see Heaven’s—”

“Not a single one of us siblings is sane.”

5

My blue blanket was on the floor in my bedroom.

For some reason, I couldn’t find the perforated knife anywhere.

Where the hell had it disappeared to?

…Whatever.

There was no meaning to it. In the end, it was merely some matter. So even if it held any kind of meaning to someone, it would be an illusion they are forcing onto it. And illusions act like a kind of drug to our brain, making them feel exceedingly comfortable. That causes some to mistake their unstable emotions for stable ones. That applies to many people, I bet.

I collapsed onto my bed.

It was 4 PM. Needless to say, the sun was still out. And, again, needless to say, there was no way I could feel sleepy.

Still…instead of sleepiness, I was visited by a colossal sense of loss.

The loss caused by Sana's death.

It had taken me six hours after being informed of her death to finally recognize it (in parts).

It took that long for it to sink in completely. That being said, I didn't know I was such a giant nitwit that it would take me this long to recognize someone's death.

Being this stupid, it wouldn't be too shocking to find out that some people I'd convinced myself to be alive were actually dead.

I firmly closed my eyes.

And weirdly enough...I fell asleep immediately.

6

Now, this is where it gets interesting.

Ootsuki Suzuhiko visited my apartment at 9 PM on the same day.

"Nice to meet you."

The broken doorbell rang, so I went to open the door and found a young man there. He wasn't much older or younger than me. His shirt had Kim Deal's face printed on it. His face was kinda juvenile. The duffle bag hanging from his shoulders seemed heavy.

He looked like a well-adjusted, normal guy at first glance, but to me, who had my observation skills trained by my defective siblings, he was triggering a red (danger) light in my head.

"Who are you?"

"I am Ootsuki Suzuhiko."

He was smiling.

"Who?"

"It really is hot today," the guy calling himself Ootsuki made a tired expression without breaking his smile. He seemed shrewd. "Winter can't come soon enough. Well, Autumn is acceptable too, I guess."

"Hey..."

“You’re Kagami Kimihiko, right?”

“…What about it? Have we met somewhere?”

“Didn’t I just say it was my first time meeting you?”

“Yeah?”

“Ah, hold on a second.” He put down his duffle bag in the entrance. “This thing weighs a ton. Electrical appliances are so heavy, geez.”

“So who are you?”

I asked again.

“Ootsuki Suzuhiko.”

Ootsuki answered again.

“Ootsuki Suzuhiko…who are you?”

“Who? That’s a curious question. I am me. Is that even worth questioning? Oh right, my condolences,” Ootsuki bowed, still a smile on his face.

“What?”

“For Sana-chan. She went through a lot.”

“…You know about Sana?”

My voice cracked. She’d gone through what?

“Of course.”

Who in the world was he? My brain was flickering between the red lamp and question marks.

“And? What are you here for?”

“You finally asked! That’s a natural question. Being alive without any goal would simply be boring, after all.”

“Answer my question.”

“Let’s not stay at the door, I’ll come in.”

He lifted the duffle bag again and proceeded inside the apartment without a hint of hesitation.

“Where do you think you are?”

“Ah, I’m so thirsty… It’s just so hot outside. An abnormal weather for sure.” As soon as he sat on the floor, Ootsuki spread his Kim Deal shirt’s sleeves to let some air enter it. He then opened the duffle bag and took out a

box the size of a dictionary. “Do you have any iced tea? Look, I brought some snacks.”

“...Huh?”

“Royce chocolate.”

I didn’t get what he was playing at. What the hell was he trying to do? I decided to put up with his request in order to establish a dialogue for the time being. I took a plastic bottle of tea from the fridge and poured some into a cup without interrupting my prosaic thoughts. I then handed it to Ootsuki and asked him if he was Sana’s friend.

“I’m not.”

Ootsuki brought the tea to his mouth and made a face as though he was experiencing the first contact between humanity and God (in other words, he found it delicious). He was good at making a big deal out of nothing.

“Then how do you know Sana?”

“Do you have a VCR?”

“No.”

“Ah, lucky me.” He wiped the sweat from his forehead and put up an even bigger smile. I’d never seen someone wearing so many smiles on their face. “So my troubles were not in vain.”

“...Seriously, who the hell are you?”

“You don’t need to know my identity.”

He answered in a composed voice.

“Are you connected to Sana in any way?”

“Connected? That sounds lewd.”

“What’s your goal?”

“Oh please, don’t treat people like they’re part of a secret society.”

“Can you cut it out, for real?”

I was about to snap.

“Have you read the will already?”

“Huh?”

“You couldn’t hear me? I asked if you have read Sana-chan’s will.”

“…You even know that?”

My mom cared about her public image a lot, so I imagined she’d have treated Sana’s suicide like it was a top-secret state affair. So had my talkative sister spread the word? Even so, it had spread too quickly.

“What did you think upon reading it, Kimihiko-kun?”

Ootsuki interrupted my thoughts.

“What are you trying to imply?”

What was there to think about? I didn’t even get Abe Kobo’s stuff, what would I draw out of a simple ‘Sorry’?

“Doesn’t ring a bell? Nothing like ‘Sana didn’t write this herself’?”

My vision turned blank. I seriously considered punching him.

“Don’t make such a scary face. You look like a killer. I was just joking. Didn’t you get to see the results of the handwriting analysis?” Ootsuki wiped the drops of sweat that’d formed on his nape before drinking the whole cup of tea in a fell swoop. He then looked into my eyes. “Now that you’ve treated me to this delicious tea, let me introduce the main topic. Yeah, the big, main one.” He stuck a hand inside his duffle bag.

As he did that, I waited for his next move in silence. I wanted to do something, but didn’t know what and lacked the courage to anyway. A cornered rat unable to even take a bite at the cat. I was a Japanese man teleported to an alley in New York…

Ootsuki took out a VCR and a cassette tape from the bag and connected the machine to my TV without asking for permission.

“Alright,” he nodded. “Everything’s set up.”

“The heck’s that?”

“Illegal, uncensored stuff.”

“And you came here to show me this?”

I glared at Ootsuki.

“Sort of.”

He didn’t budge.

"...You realize, don't you? I just had my little sister pass away, I don't have time for your stuff."

I had only been informed of her death a handful of hours earlier. Someone with regular nerves would still be wailing in shock. They would be devastated. Did he want to be punched so much he had to fuck with someone in that condition?

"That shouldn't be a problem."

Ootsuki answered plainly while operating the video.

"Why is that?"

"I mean, you're a lunatic."

Hearing that, for some reason, I laughed. The next moment, I realized I was indeed insane. I had, without a doubt, inherited the Kagami's maddening blood. Was it messed up that I wished I'd been abandoned and found under a bridge?

That being said... My eyes were glued to Ootsuki's back. Who was this joyful trespasser? Why to my apartment? And why would I play along with his hobby of showing strangers his cassette tapes... Wait, no, don't forget, me. This guy wasn't here purely for entertainment.

After all, my instincts were telling me he was *dangerous*...

"Okay, I'm playing it now," Ootsuki sounded jovial. He turned his head my way and showed me his twisted face. "Are you all set?"

"For what?"

"Kimihiko-kun, I will show you what you've been wanting to see."

7

The image quality was mediocre and the camera fixed in place. There was no zooming or close-ups involved. One could tell at first glance it was a hidden camera's recording.

The scene was a hotel room (that's what it looked like to me). A very orthodox room, the type that costs 20 thousand yen for a night (that's what

it looked like to me). Beige walls and light pink curtains. A TV on the left side of the screen. A giant bed in the middle. And a wooden chair on the right side.

In that room, a plump, middle-aged man…with his tightly-worn necktie and his business suit, was looking stuffy as hell…however, he was just sitting on the bed, looking at the TV. The TV's Braun tubes were facing the same direction as the hidden cam, so I couldn't tell what the plump man—well, the fatty—was watching, but…given his hearty laughs, he must've been watching some variety show. The camera showed the state of the room for a good while.

No notable change occurred until four to five minutes into the movie.

An elderly man looking like an egyptian mummy decorated with a bunch of jewels and a tall man wearing a slender suit and silver-rimmed glasses, giving off an air reminiscent of an old-school PTA chairman, entered the room.

The fatty panicked his ass off the bed and bowed to these two. Cowardly, lowly, as though scraping the floor with his head.

"Hello, thank you for coming, I hope you are having a nice evening."

But the two men didn't reply to his greeting. The glasses-wearing man looked around the room while the old man sat on the wooden chair. The fatty seemed to be an underling.

"And where are the goods?"

The glasses-wearing man asked. Ah…right, I had seen his face somewhere before.

"Well, you see, that dumbass Sasaki said he got caught in traffic," the fatty got heated, making his rubber ball-looking stomach wobble. "It's terrible, I'm sorry. That guy is so useless."

"You're the useless one." The glasses-wearing man fastened his necktie. "You shouldn't blame others."

"Y-yes, my apologies."

"Is the traffic that bad?"

"Ah, no. Not that much, it seems. When he called ten minutes ago he told me he was kind of maybe sort of close."

"So is he?"

The glasses-wearing man asked in an irritated tone.

"Ah, well, you see," the fatty wiped his forehead. He must've been panicking. "I-is he?"

"Don't ask me."

The glasses-wearing man glared at the fatty. That type of look has existed since humans learned to stand on their two feet, it was that of one looking at someone inferior to them in contempt.

"Really, I'm sincerely sorry for the inconvenience. That fucking Sasaki, making you wait for so long... I'll give him a punch later."

"I want to punch *you*."

"Tone it down..." The old man sitting on the wooden chair spoke. His voice was surprisingly powerful. Aah, I remembered having seen him before too... "You're disrupting my focus."

"My deepest apologies."

"My deepest apologies."

The old man slightly raised his gaze and looked at the fatty and the glasses-wearing man. I felt like the rough image quality wasn't the only thing that participated in making his face look unnatural, as though it was a mannequin on which someone had plastered bits of flesh and skin.

Then, a ringtone started playing from inside the fatty's bossom. He really had the audacity to use Kraftwerk, huh? *3-Minute Cooking*'s tune was good enough for that fatty.[6]

"Hey Sasaki, you're fucking late!" He screamed as soon as he answered the call. "I can't believe you, where are you now... Ooh, good. I see. Then hurry up, dumbass. Yeah, that room. We're already waiting. Yeah, yeah, of course, dumbass, dumbass," the fatty unleashed a sequence of insults before

[6] *Kewpie 3-Minute Cooking*, a classic cooking show of Japanese television that started in 1962 and has not stopped ever since, with a new 10-minute episode (originally 3-minute) being broadcasted every Monday to Saturday.

hanging up, putting on a menial smile, and reported to the glasses-wearing man. "He arrived at the hotel just now."

"I've been meaning to say it for a while, but your vocabulary is really poor."

"What?"

"Do you only know the word 'dumbass'?"

The glasses-wearing man's tone was brimming with scorn.

"Ah, no, not at all..."

The fatty desperately started making excuses for himself to solve the misunderstanding, but neither the glasses-wearing man nor the old man reacted. However, to me, they didn't seem to be ignoring him as much as their minds seemed to be elsewhere.

A few minutes later, I heard a knock on the room's door. The fatty turned theatrically to the door and asked who it was, and the person behind the door whispered, "It's Sasaki."

"Come in."

The glasses-wearing man's voice was serene.

A new character then entered the scene, walking in the camera's field of view while bowing. It was a man with an insecure expression. He made a face that would erase anyone's hopes of him eventually becoming an upstanding member of society. Assistant manager was probably the best he could ever manage.

However...I didn't give a damn about that.

My eyes were drawn to the young girl sleeping on that assistant manager fucker's back.

Sana.

It was Sana.

Sana was sleeping on that man's back with her school uniform on.

I was confused.

Why?

What?

How?

Huh?

"...I apologize for the wait," the insecure assistant manager fucker whispered in an insecure voice. "Ehm..." he turned to the old man sitting on the chair as he unloaded Sana onto the bed. I could see her very clearly now. Her sleeping face, her legs protruding from her skirt, and everything. "Um, here you go, these are the promised goods," he threw a glance near to where the camera was.

"This girl is?" The glasses-wearing man looked at Sana, dubious. "She's younger than I thought...is this really okay?"

"Ah. But she is a high schooler. There is no problem."

Looks like this guy was a genius at pissing people off too.

"Hm... Well, you've captured her, there is no turning back now. It would just be a waste to let her go now."

"Yes, exactly. As they say, a man without appetite for what's in front of him isn't a real man."

The fatty observed Sana, looking all excited. I couldn't tell through the screen, but I bet his nostrils were dilating. And the small thing below his stomach must've gotten somewhat larger. Ahh, that fucker, I wanna beat him to death. I sincerely felt an urge to kill arise within me.

"I envy your carefreeness," the glasses-wearing man squinted his eyes from beneath his glasses. "Is that the only thing coursing through your head? If so, go visit the Philippines or something. Jeez...this isn't for amusement. Do you get that?"

"Ah, yes. Of course, of course I understand. I am sufficiently aware of it," the fatty nodded in panic. "I couldn't be any more aware of the fact this is not for amusement. Yes, of course. Thinking only of amusement is indecent, it's scandalous, it's—"

"You're really noisy, aren't you? You can disappear now. You should have done so ages ago, even."

"However..."

“Your original job was to deliver the goods and handle any incidents,” the glasses-wearing man grinned. “And look at you, salivating at the idea of partaking in the ceremony. Don’t you find it strange? It’s like sharing a watermelon with the delivery man.” The glasses-wearing man might be a sadist. “It’s time for you to go home, delivery man. The exit is this way.”

“P...p-p-please forgive my rudeness!” The fatty got flustered and bowed down. “Please forgive me. Hey, Sasaki, you apologize too, dumbass,” he screamed and glared at the assistant manager fucker.

“Sasaki-kun has not done anything wrong, though.”

“However...”

The fatty looked away from the assistant manager fucker, wiped his forehead like a madman, and kept apologizing over and over. The assistant manager fucker called Sasaki or whatever was glaring at the fatty, but the man in question was obviously too flustered to notice that.

“Let’s start.”

Suddenly, the old man’s voice chimed in.

That cut short the vulgar conversation between the fatty and the glasses-wearing man, and made the assistant manager fucker leave the room.

Sana was then raped.

First by the old man, then by the glasses-wearing man, and finally by the fatty.

Sana resisted in surprise and shock, but she couldn’t match their strength. Her movements were easily restrained. They undressed her, removed her underwear, and broke her mind.

At first she gritted her teeth, trying to endure the disgrace, but at the end she could only cry. She was wailing.

And every time she called for my help while crying, I was visited by the urge to kill myself.

This is too much.

I don’t want to say anything anymore.

I’ve said enough, haven’t I?

Or…is this not enough?
Is it still not sufficient?

8

I stood up, grabbed the VCR, and smashed it against the TV screen with all my strength. The Braun screen fissured along with some huge noise of something breaking. And yet the sound was still working. Sana was still sobbing through the speakers I'd failed to destroy. My head was saturated. The world was disgusting. This had to be some kind of mistake. Of course it was a mistake. I kicked the TV. I kicked it again, and again, and again. Even so, Sana's voice wouldn't stop. Kick. Sobbing. Kick. Gasping. Gasping, gasping, gasping. Rinse and repeat. Aaah, please no more. Go away, go away. Go the fuck away! This time I slammed my heel on top of the TV. I felt something snapping. Sana's voice stopped. I took out the VCR attached to the TV. I smashed it too. Break. Break. Break. Break break break break break. Half of the tape had come out. I pulled it with all my might. Its black tongue kept extending out and out. Fucking, don't make fun of me! I kicked the clump of metal and stuff that was no longer just a VCR or a tape, threw that same clump of metal and stuff against the wall, and watched various parts scatter in all directions. Despite all of that my urges (a one-sided and strong admiration for a resolution attained through violence) didn't die down and there are no emotions as dangerous as those that don't calm down. I glared at Ootsuki and his persistent smile before he blasted away as though his nose bridge acted as a north pole to my fist coming down his face but even so he was still smiling Blood was flooding from his nose but he was still smiling so I thought I had to hurry up and kill him. I asked Ootsuki What the fuck was that while breathing roughly. I explained it already Illegal uncensored stuff So how was it were you excited It's a real life rape after all it has some punch… I stuck my fist inside Ootsuki's mouth and made him writhe in pain. Stop it with all that bullshit That's not what I asked I'm asking what the fuck was this video. I told

you earlier didn't I This is what you wanted to see Or are you not satisfied yet You're so greedy Kimihiko a true emperor of the night. I opened my bloodshot eyes wide open and threw a knee at his solar plexus His body bent in two. Shut up Fuck off Don't say weird things about Sana Don't say— Oh but why are you denying it It's nothing to be ashamed of really Holding romantic feelings towards your little sister isn't a sin or a point of shame Do you know that there are plenty of people with twisted love for their biological mother or grandfather or— I dug another fist into Ootsuki's cheeks and caught him by the collar as he groaned in pain. I told you to shut up I don't give a fuck about that I'm asking what this video was The next time you say something retarded I'll seriously plant a knife through your stomach.

"Do you still not get it?"

Ootsuki's tone became stern. He then grabbed the wrist of my hand that was about to hit him again.

What had happened...all my strength had suddenly left me.

Ootsuki released my wrist, stated clearly that Sana had been raped by these men, and got away from me.

"You mean the men in the video?"

I instantly revived the images burnt into my memory (that would probably never fade away). Fatty. Glasses. Old man.

"Exactly..." Ootsuki checked the position of his jaw and wiped his ongoing nosebleed. Despite all of that, he was still smiling. "These three raped Sana-chan."

"Who the hell are they?"

"You want to know?"

"Fucking answer me!" I screamed. That alone must've snapped two or three arteries inside my head.

"Don't be so hasty," Ootsuki carefully touched the tip of his nose. "Erm, there was a fatty in a business suit, wasn't there?"

"Yeah."

“He’s the son of the Mikuni System corporation’s chairman, Mikuni Yoshiaki. Next up,” he patted his solar plexus, “one of them was wearing silver-rimmed glasses, you remember?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t you already know him? He’s Toudou Soujirou. And last, there was an older man wearing golden rings and bracelets, right?”

“Yeah.”

“He is the Ketouin conglomerate’s head, Ketouin Hatakiyo.”

I looked at my red-swollen fists with no particular interest. Splinted fingers. Creaking joints... That was my first time hitting someone. But I was used to hurting people, so I didn’t mind.

These guys had broken Sana.

They’d broken Sana.

They had... They had...

Fuck.

My urge to kill was completed.

I’d kill them.

I’d kill them.

Kill,

“Are you already thinking of a way to get your revenge?” Ootsuki asked, his face covered in blood. Kim Deal was painted in red too. “But killing them won’t be easy.”

Mikuni.

Toudou.

Ketouin.

Thanks to Ootsuki’s explanation I’d now fully remembered their identities.

Mikuni System was one of the top game makers gluing kids to TV screens. They’d recently started investing in the internet and in the film industry and had great success with it.

Toudou was a novelist that had his TV debut with a famous drama adapting one of his works a few years back, a script writer, and a major shareholder in Mikuni system. He was recently rumored to dip his toes into politics.

And Ketouin was the name of a colossal-class conglomerate no one in Japan could ignore the existence of (I remembered his face from the cover of an economics magazine the eldest brother had).

It wouldn't be as easy as killing mere salarymen.

"If you're dead set on killing them, you'd have to ask Golgo 13 or a hitman. Well…from what I can see, though, you don't have the money for that. Remember, Mukodono won't lift a finger without some money.[7] Not like I've ever really looked at hitmen. Ah, but I've played the games. They were beyond grea—"

"Hey."

I cut him in his blathering.

"Mn?"

"Why did these guys rape Sana?"

"Purely for their amusement. Obviously."

He answered with as much effort as it would take to collapse a sand castle.

"Amusement…"

Had Sana's entire life existed for the sole purpose of entertaining these disgusting buffoons? That's too unfair. That's too…

No, hold on.

…This isn't for amusement.

The glasses-wearing man—Toudou had said that. No, but that must've been a make-believe. A poor justification of their acts. It was commonplace even back during the Asuka era[8] that evildoers seek to crown themselves with an artificial justice.

Plus, no matter the reason behind it, raping Sana was a sin. To me, at least.

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[7] *Mukodono!* Is a 2001 Japanese drama.
[8] An era of Japan lasting from 538 to 710.

“Kimihiko-kun, actually, I brought you a present.” Ootsuki took something out of his duffle bag. Chocolates, video tapes, that bag had everything. It must’ve been a 4D Pocket of higher quality than Doraemon’s. “Here, for you.”

It was an envelope.

Of a white more seedy than snow, but purer than an egg.

A gross color, frankly.

I checked the contents and spotted three pictures along with three sheets of paper.

I looked at them closely.

What were these…?

My lamp started flickering once again.

This was bad news.

I shouldn’t look at them.

It would push me past the point of no return.

Where was that point?

The notion of turning back had already vanished from my mind.

I would see this to its end.

“You see the photo of the girl eating a chocolate parfait at the parlor? That’s Mikuni Yoshiaki’s daughter, Akiko,” Ootsuki started talking without even glancing at the pictures. “A lovely seventeen-year-old girl.”

“…”

“Then there’s a girl playing guitar at a bar, right? That’s Toudou Soujirou’s daughter, Yumie. She’s a college student. Well, that’s obvious given how arrogantly she handles that white Les Paul. So irritating. Who is she, Randy Rhoads?”

“…”

“The last one is a girl with long hair reading a book. You see her? The expressionless girl with a vacant look on her face. She is…Ketouin Hatakiyo’s granddaughter, Yuika. She goes to the same high school you graduated

from," Ootsuki entered my field of view. His face was undoubtedly damaged from my attacks, but he was smiling nevertheless. "Does she ring a bell?"

"Hey," my voice was shaking with primitive fear and gentlemanly expectations. "What are these about?" The sheets that were in the envelope along with the pictures had the address, schedule, and a ton more detailed information about each of the girls Ootsuki had introduced. "What's the meaning behind this?"

"You know what they say, to each man his meaning," Ootsuki pointed at the notes I was holding. "The meaning these notes have for you. The meaning these notes have for me. The objects might be the same, but those are wholly different."

"I don't get your intent..."

My brain was exploding out of confusion. However, the last intact piece sleeping in the deepest part was tingling, shining a dark...and yet magnificent light. I was aware of it.

"You don't get it, you say? Don't be such a liar, Kimihiko-kun," Ootsuki said in a firm, yet somewhat threatening voice. "I'm sick of lies already. Yeah...sick to death. I'm telling the truth. I hate lies." He brought his bloodied face even closer to me. "So please, answer without any lies. Tell me, what do you want to do? Enact your revenge, right? A revenge that will satisfy both you and Sana-chan. Am I wrong?

A revenge that would satisfy both Sana and me?

What I wanted...

What I wanted...

I was at a loss for words. A cold drop of sweat entered my eye.

"Welp...it's about time I take my leave. See you, Kimihiko-kun. Thanks for the tea. Don't forget chocolate goes bad pretty quickly. Finish them while you can." Ootsuki picked up his empty duffle bag and turned on his heels. "Also, at least try burning an incense stick for Sana-chan. I know you hate funerals, but...still."

“H-ho...hold...hold on!” I came to my senses and yelled at Ootsuki, who was already turning the door knob. “Who are you? Why did you tell me all of that? Hey! Hey, answer me!”

“See you around, then.”

9

I spent three days thinking without eating or drinking anything, then on the fourth day...on the morning of August ninth, my mind was set.

I’d first head to the closest house.

I inspected the notes I’d read to death even deader this time.

The closest to my apartment located in Chitose would be Mikuni Akiko’s residence in the Atsubetsu district of Sapporo. The second closest was Ketouin Yuika in the Chuo district. The condo where Toudou Yumie lived wasn’t that far, but going there would certainly qualify as a trip. So I decided by elimination to head to Mikuni Akiko’s residence for now.

Well, it was just for reconnaissance. No need to be hasty. I would take all the time I needed, and engage with it like it was a field trip.

I suddenly felt hungry. I was at my wits’ end, but going three days without ingesting anything was too reckless. I would die a monk if I kept it up.

I sluggishly rose to my feet. It hurt. My knees screamed. I visited the kitchen for the first time in a while and opened the fridge for the first time in a while. I took out some ham, a jar of mayonnaise, and a bottle of Pocari Sweat, then swiftly closed the door. I took a sip of the Pocari, lightly applied mayonnaise on bread, and added two slices of ham on top of it. I sank my teeth into the bread.

Time to get started.

Chapter 2

Do Not Act Carelessly

1

"Um, Kimihiko-kun..."

"Woaaah!" If someone got called out from behind in their supposedly-empty apartment, it's only natural they would break into a cold sweat. Even more so if they'd only come back to pick up their stun gun and were meandering between somnolence and alertness. "...Asumi? Err, why are you here? Oh, playing trespasser?"

"I came in through the front door. I even rang the bell for a while."

"Huh...really? I didn't notice. Seriously."

"You've always lost track of your surroundings when you're deep in thought."

"Have I?"

"There you finally are.." Asumi looked a bit anxious. Her shoulders were hanging low. "Where have you been this whole time? You ignored all my calls."

"Ah, you see, uhh...stuff. Yeah."

"You didn't even show up to uni. Circles still operate during Summer vacation, you know?"

"Ah, uni..."

It'd slipped out of my mind.

"Please tell me, where were you? Your car wasn't there so you were out, no?"

I obviously couldn't give an honest answer. I'd sworn to myself to keep silent. Asumi scrutinized my lips for a little while, then gave up all hopes of getting an answer, and sat on my bed.

"...You know," Asumi hung her head. "It's fine if you don't want to say it, but..."

"But...what?"

"Please just don't do things that will make me worried."

"Playing the nosy housewife act again?"

I forced a wry smile onto my face.

“But when Yuna-san died you—”

“I was young and stupid,” I tried to answer casually. “Don’t sweat it, everything’s fine, I won’t do anything weird.” That was a lie…probably. “I’m simply getting over a heartbreak.”

“…Regarding Sana-chan?”

“Yeah.”

“Really.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey.”

“Mm?”

“Why didn’t you show up to Sana-chan’s funeral?”

Woah, that sure sounded like something Sana would say.

“No real reason.”

“But it was her funeral, not a random event.”

“So what, if it’s Sana’s I should go but if it’s Nee-san’s I don’t need to?”

“That’s not…”

“…Sorry. Looks like I’m getting dumber.”

I apologized in earnesty. That remark was awful of me.

“It’s fine, I don’t mind,” Asumi raised her face and smiled. I was really surprised. “Um, so will you go to uni starting tomorrow?”

“No…I won’t for a bit. I’ll be busy with something.”

“More heartbreak recovery?”

“Something like that. But I’ll return pretty soon.”

“I’m glad…”

“…Yeah.” An awkward exchange. Bits of sentences cobbled together. I was honestly fed up with it. I didn’t have time for that. “Asumi, please…”

“Eh?”

“Um, sorry but could you leave me alone to think?”

She rose from the bed as soon as the words left my mouth.

“Of course… I shouldn’t be here, right. My bad.” She slightly hung her head. “Errr, yeah. I’ll be going then…”

Asumi left my room with the gait of a drunken flamingo. I heard the door closing.

Time to get started.

2

After nine days of investigation, I’d figured out one thing.

Mikuni Akiko and Ketouin Yuika—reaching these two would prove extremely hard. They get driven to and from their schools and didn’t go outside after classes. And when they did, it was usually for cram school or lessons. Neither Mikuni Akiko nor Ketouin Yuika were trying to communicate with the outside world. They were beyond sheltered. Was that the case for all rich girls? That sounds like a stereotype, but such was my reality, so whatever. Anyway, I would have a hard time getting in contact with these two. I had to think of a shrewd plan.

So Toudou Yumie came first. She was further away, but also way easier to contact due to her living alone.

My plan was all decided (though it’s incredibly sloppy since I’d come up with it in a hurry). I had to return home first to pick up my stun gun. And as to why I was in possession of something so dangerous, it’s because Nee-san had gifted it to me for my 15th birthday (I will say for her sake that she was far more broken at the time than now).

I stretched out while yawning. Chronic fatigue. I had been constantly tailing someone for the past nine days and only allowed myself a few hours of napping per day. What an admirably hard worker I was. And there’s the old saying, if you work hard, no dream will be out of your reach. Though that played no role here.

I put away the regularized, 100-kilovolt stun gun the size of my palm inside my pocket, kissed my apartment door goodbye for the moment, and ran my car's worn-out tires on the asphalt.

The condo Toudou Yumie lived in, Asada Heim, was situated in Sapporo's Teine district. That district was a fair distance away, but I managed to arrive at my destination at exactly 6 PM. I had some time to spare. That was proof I was panicking. Calm down, me.

The area surrounding the condo was as intricate as in Heiankyo Alien,[9] but I'd already resolved that problem during the reconnaissance phase. I parked my car in front of the park directly facing Asada Heim. This area was apparently used as a parking lot by the locals. The fence was surrounded by cars day and night, therefore mine wouldn't appear suspicious. However, that wouldn't save the day if people thought *I* was suspicious. I didn't sense anyone nearby, but I walked away from Asada Heim just in case and gazed at the dim sky.

It sure was hot outside. I was parched after not even five minutes. I thought of entering the nearby Lawson, but stopped myself in extremis: *Hold on, there are security cameras in convenience stores*. Well, not like appearing on them would do much, but still, better safe than sorry. Giving up on the store, I sought a vending machine and bought a Pocari Sweat from it. The blue can of Pocari dropped down and produced a loud, metallic noise.

I explored the neighborhood while drinking it to kill time. An area I would probably never have stepped foot into if not for what happened to Sana. There was a bleak beauty parlor on my right. Turning at the corner beyond that, I spotted a mop-like dog sleeping on its house's roof à la Snoopy. Further up the hill was a home appliance store with a bunch of fans decorating its facade…

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[9] Released in Japan in 1979 then in North America in 1980 under the title *Digger*, this pioneer in the video game industry and huge success in Japan was one of the first maze chase games, even predating *PacMan*. It has the player incarnate as a soldier during the Heian era to protect the city from an alien invasion.

I felt like I was strolling through my hometown. I'd memorized the city map in a one-kilometer-diameter circle around Asada Heim. There was no meaning to it. Better safe than sorry…that's all. People repeat equally meaningless actions all the time and eventually get rewarded by 'something.' And in my case that simply happened to be the à la Snoopy dog.

It reminded me of the one time, long ago, Sana and I were playing in a park and an injured dog came waddling in our direction. It had probably been hit by a car. One of its front legs was bending in a weird direction and blood was flowing out of its nose and mouth. It was breathing abnormally fast. I remember my young self with decades ahead to live thinking, 'Oh, looks like it'll die soon,' while on a swing.

Maybe due to having borrowed and read some pompous Mori Ogai books from the eldest daughter, I suddenly got the idea of euthanizing that dog. But…I think my impetus wasn't pity, empathy, or anything that silly; it was above that. That's the amazing thing with kids.

I searched for a rock big enough to crush the dog's head, but Sana noticed my intent and tried stopping me because she felt I shouldn't kill it. She told me I didn't have the right to do that kind of thing. So I asked what her idea was, and Sana abruptly hugged the bloodied, dirty dog. I was stunned and couldn't do anything.

She carried the dying dog behind the park's toilets and put it down there. Sana's 12,000-yen shirt was smeared with blood. I asked what her intent was. She told me in a gloomy voice that she had hid it there because the dog would be embarrassed to have people see its corpse. It was convincing, the collapsed dog's expression was indeed brimming with bravery and pride.

Sana then cried for a bit.

The tears she shed back then must have been her reward.

I stomped the empty can flat with my foot while admiring the sky's colors and reminiscing Sana's voice; it was then slightly past 7 PM.

Nearly time.

I ran back to the park. It was still not fully dark outside. That was my biggest complaint, but some degree of risk was unavoidable. After all, this single path going across the park was my only junction point with Toudou Yumie. Being there in and of itself meant taking a risk. But in theory, if I searched for other ways of reaching her, I would likely find some other options. I might even run into her by chance eventually. However, I didn't want to waste time before proceeding with my plans. I wanted to make Sana rejoice as soon as possible. I wanted to satisfy myself quickly.

I observed my surroundings. Fortunately, no one was around (at least not in the spots I could observe directly). I hid in a corner of the run-down playground. This exact place was a blind spot from every possible angle (of course I'd checked it myself). I crouched and formally prayed to God. I didn't forget to also take deep, formal breaths. After spending 30 seconds on these formal actions, I started observing the path lying 7-8 meters ahead of me.

The problem was that Toudou Yumie had a boy from her university drive her home. I had no idea if he was her boyfriend, just a friend, or some poor random guy she was using. Well, not like there was any meaning in figuring that out anyway. After all, his existence and that alone presented a problem for me. He would accompany Toudou Yumie from the university to this path in the direction of Asada Heim. That was the reason why I couldn't find any other way of reaching Toudou Yumie. If I could find a way past him, I'd have nothing to worry about.

Okay, no more sinking into thoughts.

I only had to wait now.

To wait for his Celsior's engine to approach at around 7:20 PM.

Today, that sound resembling an elephant's breath reached my ears at 7:28 PM.

The engine's deep sound then turned into the even-deeper idling mode's sound.

The metallic-blue Celsior was slowly coming closer.

It stopped before the entrance to the park.

The passenger door opened.

Long legs appeared from it.

Surroundings check. Clear, nobody around.

Breathing check. Clear, I hadn't forgotten.

I strained my eyes even further and stared at a single point amidst this somber world.

The long legs had completely stepped out of the car.

A plain, black shirt and a long skirt with a pattern like you'd find on an expensive rug.

Semi-long hair dyed light-brown.

Powerful eyes excelling in communicating their owner's mind.

That was Toudou Yumie.

Toudou Yumie was talking with the driver. I had no idea what they were saying, but that mattered not for the current me. He could've been proposing to her for all I cared.

Once they were done, the Celsior left. And Toudou Yumie was left behind.

Toudou Yumie was left behind…alone.

I had to make a decision.

No, I'd already made my choice a long time ago.

I had no hesitation.

I wasn't tense.

I would simply act.

I would become a stork who'd convinced itself it was actually a machine,

And simply act.

I readied my stun gun.

Toudou Yumie had her back to me.

Someone ordered me to go.

That someone was myself. Obviously.

I jumped out of my hiding spot.

I extended my hand holding the stun gun,

And attacked Toudou Yumie's back.

It made a faint, brief whistle.

That sound marked the start to everything and the end to everything.

3

'Don't feel safe just because you moved out'

A classic newspaper font. Despair was assailing Asumi's world. Her mind quivered. She feared her place in the world would collapse.

'Don't feel safe just because you moved out'

She knew it painfully well. She was well aware 'he' would never overlook her escaping. After all, he was merciless, cunning, and intelligent like a satellite orbiting around Earth. He would pursue her to the end of the world. He was of an even worse ilk than Gerard.[10]

'Don't feel safe just because you moved out'

Asumi ripped the envelope apart with her shaking hands and desperately cogitated to find a way forward. It had now been proven she couldn't escape from him. And Asumi lived alone, far from her parents. He could even show up to her door. She wanted to be rescued, but the police wouldn't be of any help. They would surely say something stupid like they couldn't arrest him because he hadn't committed any crimes yet. Her parents were in the middle class and she was a mere college student, so she had no money to hire a bodyguard. Nor did she have a boyfriend to protect her...

Kimihiko's face flashed in her mind for an instant, but she gave up on that idea after remembering his little sister had just committed suicide. When she met him today for the first time in a few days, he had seemed broken. She couldn't rely on him, nor did she want to involve him in the first place. This was her own, personal problem. She knew that much.

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[10] Sam Gerard from the 1998 movie *U.S. Marshals*, released in Japan under the title *Tsuisekisha* (lit.: The Pursuer).

Nobody will protect me. I can only count on myself…huh. Asumi wiped the sweat covering her face and closed the curtains. A rush of adrenaline came in after a delay. Her teeth wouldn't align. She had a headache despite her period not coming anytime soon. What a waste of a Friday night…she obviously didn't have the luxury to lament like so.

'Don't feel safe just because you moved out'

She wasn't feeling safe.

She had simply run away.

However, that attempt, too, was shattered.

Crushed.

She checked her calendar. It was the 17th of August. She had only managed to hide from him for a few weeks. How exactly had he found Asumi's address? Could it be…he could connect too? No, that was out of the question. As proof, none of his letters had ever alluded to connections. Well, he could have also kept it hidden, but…

Asumi ran to the bathroom. She undressed. She observed her breasts, flatter than average, bouncing up and down from a neutral standpoint.

Can he see that too? No way.

After all…

…I haven't killed anyone.

Asumi then showered.

Nothing special happened.

Only her apprehension escalated.

4

Haunted houses really come handy in times like these. A few dozen minutes by car away from my apartment in Chitose, there was a creepy lake

called Lake Shikotsu (apparently its ancient name meant death and bones.[11] I swear). I was currently headed for the obscure 'ghost hospital' situated nearby that lake. It was a hospital reputed to house ghosts, and was no longer in service.

I was planning on making that place…my prison.

Usually, spots like these tend to be visited by couples trying to manifest their love for each other in an explicit way, or groups of virgins or bored delinquents seeking some cheap thrills or wanting to boast of their guts for no apparent reason, but it seemed this hospital *really* was haunted, so those types of people became rare in the past few years. How stupid must one be to believe that…geez.

Sana was scared of ghosts, and any type of ghost at that. She feared Jason, Freddie, Oiwa-san,[12] and even Gizmo. Moreover, I knew she had prayed in secret after watching *The Exorcist* that Nee-san had rented.

I stopped my car at a red light. I was on a steep slope, so, hating instability above all else, that immediately worsened my mood. Toudou Yumie was still asleep in the passenger seat. A deep slumber. I'd restrained her movements with handcuffs just in case, but it seemed there was no need for it.

The light turned green, and I stepped on the pedal. Automatic cars are such a breeze. The minds of people willing to drive manuals were outside of my comprehension. Really, why go for the less convenient option? Is there any meaning to it?

After driving some more through the twisted path on the lake's shore, I came out in an area basked in a denser obscurity where my destination awaited.

The hospital was only surrounded by dark trees. Nothing else to be seen. However, a desolate place isn't necessarily a deserted place. I needed to be

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[11] Shikotsu (支笏) is homophonic to a junction of the kanji for death (死; SHI) and bones (骨; KOTSU), so that lake is reputed to be of bad omen, but the actual etymology stems from the Ainu word 'si-kot-pet,' meaning big, hollow, and river.

[12] The main character of *Ghost Story of Yotsuya*, one of Japan's most famous ghost tales.

that careful at every step of my plan. I drove past the hospital and parked my car right before the forest. It shouldn't be visible from the highway here.

I cut off the engine.

I turned off the headlights. The darkness took a leap forward.

Looking up at the sky from within the car, today's moon was technically plastered there but barely reflected any light. Huh. What an awful mood.

I grabbed my bag from the rear seat, stepped out of the car, opened the passenger door, pulled Toudou Yumie out, and carried her on my back. I was lucky she weighed less than expected.

I hurried to the hospital's main entrance while paying extra attention and caution to our surroundings. That was the only entrance apart from the broken windows. All other doors were properly locked and sealed with thick wires. I went through the cute mishap of tripping over a pebble on the way there, but we safely reached the door without anyone witnessing us.

The hospital was a standard seven-floor building. It wasn't any more colorful than other ruins. If you found yourself here with no context, it just looked like a lame, destroyed hospital. In terms of pure atmosphere, DisneyLand at the dead of night is 30 times more intense (though that's because delinquents had drawn small graffiti of Mickey Mouse and such all over the walls, which erased the authentic feel proper to a ghost spot). Thinking about it, why hadn't the building been taken down? Was it the same as driving manual cars and it had a meaning outside of my grasp? ...Oh, maybe they were using it for tourism. Makes sense. Yeah.

Carrying Toudou Yumie and sifting through meaningless thoughts, I entered the building.

The heavy feeling of dread polluting the hospital's insides was too much even for me. The darkness especially got to my nerves. The flashlight I'd brought from home wasn't enough to dissipate the nervousness from my footsteps. I remembered the shards of glass scattered across the hallway's floor from my visit earlier in the day.

The second floor was the general ward. It was in a better state than the first floor which served as a lobby. Even so, the linoleum floor was peeled off and I couldn't sense an ounce of the extreme cleanliness expected from a hospital. I hurried my way to room 206. The moon appeared in the broken windows. It had always been a peeping Tom. Must be a man, I bet.

I arrived at room 206. It was a relatively large hospital room able to accomodate for seven or eight people. I explored it with my flashlight. The room only had one window sealed with planks on the wall opposite to the door. Also eight beds with broken springs, dented lockers, a TV with a fissured screen, and three folding chairs with their seat covers ripped off. The dark walls and floor reeked of filthiness. The paper crane and the color book on the floor were much too vivid.

This room 206 wasn't structured any differently than other rooms. Then why did I choose this one in particular? That's because, for some reason, the hard plywood sealing the window was nailed from the outside.

I put down Toudou Yumie onto the floor. I took out an emergency candle from my bag. My goal wasn't to use it for some *Eko Eko Azarak*-esque magic like Kokui Misa. It was just a source of light. I lit it with a lighter. A faint light with a feel unlike that of fluorescent lamps illuminated the room. I realized I was old-fashioned for not using camping lamps. Stand by Me.[13]

I searched through Toudou Yumie's pockets for her phone, then threw it onto the ground and shattered it. I then unlocked the right cuff binding her hands together and moved it to the window's iron bar (every window had iron bars. It must've been a psychiatric hospital). But this position would be tough on her, so I pulled over a nearby folding chair and had her sit on it. Wow, I'm so damn kind.

Now...having finished my work, I gazed at Toudou Yumie, sitting on the chair in a weird position.

Serves you right.

---

[13] A 1986 American movie following the adventures of four boys who go on a hike to find a missing boy's dead body.

Fuck you.

I didn't bother thinking for even a second about what I was doing, my current philosophy, my mental state, or any of that boring stuff. If my problems were trivial enough I could solve them just by thinking, then I might as well ignore them, and if they were impossible to solve, then anything I could do would be futile. Reducing these kinds of choices to the maximum and not brooding over useless stuff is the secret to (mental health) longevity.

The candle's soft light shone onto Toudou Yumie's face. Her small, open mouth was strangely irritating. An outburst of anger assaulted me... Geez, humans' trains of thoughts were really random, huh. Making people suddenly cry, laugh, be angry, go mad...

Just then, my phone rang. *Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part Two* was playing. Aaahh...why are phones always so insensitive with their timings?

The LCD screen displayed the names of Souji—the second son. I felt blue.

"Hello?"

"Yo Kimihiko, so you're awake? Can you hear my voice?"

He had a weirdly tenacious tone despite sounding cheerful. He should have turned 22 last month, and yet I couldn't feel any change in his voice. He hadn't changed one bit. Would he ever?

"Yeah...I can hear you."

"Been a fair while, huh. Four months maybe? Still, I'm really glad you're awake. You're like Yanagisawa but for sleeping and waking up early so—"

"Sorry but could you shut up, Nii-san," I said with some irritation. "I'm at a good part right now."

"Your voice is echoing. Where are you?"

"In the midst of playing with ghosts."

"How suggestive of you."

"What?"

"Still, you're quite upright for answering the phone at this hour."

“Nii-san,” I used my trump card from the get-go to skip the unproductive first half. “Sana died. Did you know?”

He had no radio or computer and didn’t read newspapers. Only Naomi and I knew his phone number in the family. I couldn’t imagine him having heard of it, given how indifferent he was towards intaking information.

No answer. Looked like he didn’t know.

“Nii-san, did you hear me?”

I checked.

“Yeah, I heard you,” he answered in a silent tone. “Is that true?”

“Of course it is!” I screamed, then glanced at Toudou Yumie next to me. Careful, careful. “As if I would say that as a joke.”

“Was it a suicide?”

He must’ve been strongly influenced by the eldest daughter too. The first thing he did was devising the formula death = suicide, so there was no doubt to it.

“No, sadly,” I murmured a reply. “She was killed.”

“Killed?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. How honest of you,” he made an unpleasant remark. “And were you the one that killed her?”

“What did you say?!”

My eyes probably became bloodshot.

“Don’t scream like that. The girl next to you will wake up.”

…What?

Chills ran down my spine. What did he mean?

“They still haven’t caught the culprit,” I put myself together and continued in good faith. I prayed for his jab to merely be a bluff. “So you see, Nii-san. Actually, Sana was raped. To be frank with you.”

“Raped?”

“Yeah, by three old fuckers.”

The moment I voiced this, the same black clump of throbbing anger formed deep in my stomach. I could hear my veins pulsating behind my ears. *Bump, bump, bump, bump.*

"Mm? And why do you know that Sana was raped by three men? Did the police seriously tell you that?" Nii-san asked insistently. "Oh, I got it. You were one of those—"

"Could you not say that kind of thing? Seriously." Being capable of learning, I could stop myself from screaming on the third time. "I'm the only one in the family who knows... There's a bit of a history behind it, you see. It's kind of an anonymous source. And thanks to it I know the identity of the people who raped Sana."

"Heh."

"...N-no?" I was confused. "Hey!"

"Mn?"

"That's not right, Nii-san. I'm saying Sana was raped. Isn't that super sad? So don't brush it away with a 'hmm.'"

"I didn't say 'hmm.'"

"Didn't you?"

"I said 'heh.'"

"Same difference," the veins in my temples were throbbing. "Anyway, Nii-san, don't you find it sad?"

"Sad, you say?" he said in a puzzled...or rather, in a surprised tone. "Huh, you're pretty pure, Kimihiko." He then delivered these intentful words. "I, naturally, recognize the existence of the feeling that is 'sadness.' I have no intention of denying that. But you know, I don't like the idea of using that sadness as a pretext to take it out on others."

"..."

He was bluffing he was bluffing he was bluffing he was bluffing.

"Kimihiko...it's your own freedom to feel grief, but don't involve others. If you're sad, keep that to yourself. Taking it out on others or blaming others

is the most foolish thing you can do. That's not someone else's sin, Kimihiko...it becomes your sin."

Bluff bluff bluff bluff bluff bluff bluff bluff bluff bluff.

"Hey, don't even try to pretend you don't understand."

"What are you..."

"Still going to play dumb?"

"Dumb?"

I was shaking.

"Then I'll be straight with you. I'm not keen on the idea of kidnapping girls in the name of avenging Sana."

5

After that I waited long enough for seven cup noodles to cook, but Toudou Yumie's eyes were as heavy as ever, so I locked room 206 (I set up a padlock I'd bought at Homac) and left the hospital.

I drove back to my apartment, and jumped straight to bed without taking a shower. My body was exhausted, and yet my mind was strangely on edge so I couldn't sleep.

...How?

My head was filled with that word.

How did Nii-san know what I was doing? He wasn't an esper or anything, he was a regular human. Only Nee-san could make use of those psychological attacks of reading someone like an open book in the family.

I forced myself to sleep.

I didn't get to dream about Sana.

I would probably continue to rot by doing this.

But...I didn't think depravity was so bad.

6

Losing my mind won't do anything.

Only running away has no merit.

...I will face reality.

Asumi swore to herself, cooped up in her room. A corner of her mind felt there was no oath more inconsequential than one sworn to oneself.

Still, was there any way out? Was there any stratagem capable of rescuing Asumi from the hell she had been stuck in for the past six years?

Fleeing was useless. No matter how far she escaped, he would catch up to her. And not even immediately...to use a common expression, he did so like a snake slowly coiling around its prey.

She was at her limit. She couldn't bear being haunted by him (in very real ways) any longer. She put on an MD in her audio equipment as a distraction. Trendy music permeated inside the room. It wasn't enough to change her mood or to even ease it, but it was better than nothing. It was about as useful as a coffee after an all-nighter.

Thinking didn't provide her any solution.

She had to do something.

But what?

Fleeing was impossible.

Fighting was out of the question.

To begin with, she didn't know who she was facing. Neither his address, age, or gender (she only called him 'he' for convenience's sake. He could very well be a woman). Asumi only knew simple facts about his behavior.

Anything...

Was there any way out?

7

An impartial morning.

I woke up at 6 AM. Today was the 18th, a Sunday.

The previous day's confusion and chaos faded away with a night's sleep. What a cinch. Some people think emotions or personality restrict humans, but these can be easily overwritten. And the sort of people who cannot understand that fact are generally labeled as 'idiots.' They try so hard to define themselves with a single personality they blind themselves to others' worlds. That reminded me of elementary school, when idiots were unconditionally bullied. The good old times.

I crawled out of bed, got dressed up in seven minutes, then headed for the station in my car. I had two destinations: Mikuni Akiko's and Ketouin Yuika's mansions.

I needed to figure out a way to break through their guard.

First came Mikuni Akiko.

The high school she attended was located in the heart of Sapporo, so it was easier to head there by train. I reached Chitose Station, bought a ticket, and descended onto the platform.

It was overflowing with students and office workers forming multiple lines waiting for the next train. *...I should've gone for South Chitose Station*, I lamented as I positioned myself at the end of a line, remembering how much I hated people lining up all night to buy the newest Dragon Quest.

A train came by after waiting for a couple minutes. The lines entered the train as though a giant-mouthed demon was devouring them. Being last in line, I didn't have a seat left. The world kept throwing these arduous trials I had to overcome with the little sleep I had. Tsk.

The train wasn't crowded enough to be described as hellish, but it still was congested enough to stress me.

A high school girl in uniform was standing on my right. I liked how she had long black hair, unusual these days (most girls who didn't jump on the wave of 'youth' had black hair and wore long skirts), and was standing straight despite the congestion.

Her big pupils, pointy chin, and eyes devoid of makeup were memorable. I liked her for no real reason. It must be necessary to feel that way from time to time.

Then…

A hand moving suspiciously caught my eyes. A hand like a chimpanzee's…it belonged to the middle-aged man standing behind me. He was trying to reach the girl's thighs with his right hand.

Oh, I see how it is…so this is molestation. But, although it made sense in a Tokyo train packed with people and no seats, what the hell was this damn pervert doing in this half-full train in the countryside?

Why was there a force uncontrollably aiming to destroy beautiful things in this world? And without batting an eye. As though it was the natural course of things. Actively engaging in it, even.

The man's right hand finally reached the girl's thighs. He then started moving like a kid touching a piano's keys for the first time. I couldn't bear watching the girl's face. As if I would ever watch a face distorted with sorrow on my own volition.

All of a sudden, my mind was overtaken by Sana's crying face.

Hey, who the fuck pressed the replay button?

I felt shivers.

The man's hand didn't stop.

I felt shivers.

The man's hand didn't stop.

I felt shivers.

The hand was about to venture into her skirt.

By that point, I didn't mind killing that man.

I readied a fist and threw a punch right at his nose. The man staggered backwards, a dumbfounded look directed at me. He bumped into an office lady wearing light makeup. That lady pushed him away with eyes full of disgust. The man hit his head against a seat and collapsed dramatically. Blood

was coming from inside his mouth; he had probably bit himself at some point. Serves him right.

The man on the floor (he still seemed aware enough to know he had to stand up quickly or he would get stepped on) was looking at me with murky eyes. Ahhh…not this face. It made me want to bully him to no end. Once again I felt like killing him, so I delivered a full-strength kick to his thighs with my toes. This was a warning. The next time he did anything silly I would put the stun gun to use for 173 seconds.

Our audience was clearly showing their annoyance on their faces, however, no one tried to directly lecture me or help the man on the floor. Cities and countryside were equally scary, eh.

The train had slowed down. A voice announced our arrival at Kitahiroshima. I ignored the man on the floor and instead looked at the girl who was previously being molested. She was staring at my fist that had sent the man flying with impervious eyes. That was my first time having someone's eyes glued onto my hands, so I wasn't sure how to react.

The girl made eye contact with me,

Then put up a bright smile.

What in the world was going through her head?

The train stopped. The door opened. People were getting off.

"Let's descend here."

The girl said. To me.

However…I couldn't do that. I had to find a breach in Mikuni Akiko's guard. "I'm happy for the invitation, but unfortunately I don't have that time," I tried to give that answer, but the next moment the girl pulled me out of the train by my hand. I was weak against forceful personalities. Sana was a good example of that.

The girl pulling me was treading across Kitahiroshima Station's crowded platform without flinching. I was barely able to follow her. Seriously, what was up with people's walking speed recently?

We left the station. A strong sunlight shone down onto us. It was already this hot in the morning… Well, if we were in late October I could voice a complaint or two, but I didn't have that right yet in the midst of August. I looked around, and sure enough we were in uncharted land (I had never set foot in Kitahiroshima). I spotted some houses, apartment buildings, and a big park. My watch was indicating 7:08 AM. Aah…today's tailing—at least for the morning—was off the plans.

I felt a gaze from behind so I looked back; the girl from earlier was looking at me with a composed expression. She pointed at the nearby park with her left hand and suggested we headed there. Having no real reason to say no, I nodded.

"You're amazing," the girl spoke while walking. She had a beautiful voice. "I was flabbergasted."

"Really?"

Following my one and only credo of acting cool to people I meet for the first time, which I've respected since the very moment I came to life, I gave a passive answer.

"Did you train in something?"

"Something?"

"Like Shaolin art, karate, or jaken?"

"Janky?"

"Jaken. The Snake-style Kung Fu."

"No, I have my own style."

"Ooh, really?" The girl sounded genuinely surprised. She opened her big eyes even wider. "But, I mean, the way your hips turned was really it. It felt mastered."

"Err…do you do anything yourself?"

"A bit of aikido. To fight off molesters. …Because I don't want to die."

"And yet you didn't fight for crap, did you?" I looked up. The sky was blue. It would probably get even hotter later. "Strength alone doesn't mean anything if you don't hit when you need to."

“Ouch,” she plucked her lips and raised her shoulders. Her uniform’s ribbon fluttered. “Well, you do have a point… I’m ashamed. It shouldn’t have gone like that. I’d always thought I would grab any molester I might come across by the wrist and throw them to the ground.”

“How violent.”

“I’m…weak when it comes to actually fighting. I can barely muster half of my strength in matches.”

“That’s just how it works.” I was strong in fights. “Well, if you find yourself mentally stressed, that just means you have leeway to improve.”

“Did that ever happen to you?”

I answered with a nod. It was the case right now.

“Ah, ehm,” the girl suddenly stopped in her steps and bowed at me. Her long hair formed a curtain. “You have my deepest gratitude for earlier. You really saved me.”

“Eh?” Being thanked so formally was pretty embarrassing. “Ah, yeah. Well…be careful next time.”

“Roger,” she raised her head, then started walking again. “Though I won’t have to worry about that again.”

“What?”

“Um, could you tell me your name if you don’t mind?”

“*My* name?”

“Is there anyone else around?”

She smiled.

“Kagami.”

I only disclosed my family name.

“I am Kobayashi Touko.”

“Touko…” I couldn’t convert it into kanji. “How do you write it?”

“Winter’s children.”

“Huh, so a snow child.”

She remarked she would be Yukiko then and giggled silently.[14]

We reached the park. Touko offered to buy me an ice cream from the shop open every summer in this park as thanks for dealing with that molester. I made a dubious face, but she insisted, saying ice was quintessential for Summer, whatever that meant. Geez, using up my precious time with such a lousy excuse…yeah, forceful personalities are the best. It's like I was in constant submission.

We reached the ice cream shop. The man running it welcomed us, all the while maintaining a smile so gentle it made me think he wouldn't hesitate a second to murder parents if that made the children happy.

"What do you want, Kagami-san?" Touko pointed at the menu listing all the items and asked me. 'All the items,' but it's not like there were more than a dozen.

"I'm fine with whatever."

"Mint chocolate."

"Woah… No hesitation."

"Anything that's not mint chocolate is heretic."

"…Normally you say that for vanilla, though."

"What's normal?"

"…Mister, please give us two mint chocolates."

8

All light vanished from her eyes.

Her first connection with him occurred during her last year of elementary school.

[14] Touko (冬子) is written with the kanji for winter and child, which Kimihiko associated with the yokai Snow Child (雪ん子), written with the kanji for snow and child and pronounced Yukinko, then remarked to be more reminiscent of the name Yukiko (雪子) than Touko.

In a bedroom. It was still bright inside, so it was probably during the day… Asumi was napping with her mother, who was already asleep, but she was wide awake, looking at her mother's back.

Just then,

Her vision started fading out.

She felt like she was being pulled by something, like she was falling—an indefinable sensation—the most faithful way to describe it would be: It was like drinking a quick-acting sleep medicine and having your eyelids react faster than your brain and slowly close.

Despite her severed vision, Asumi sought for help to her mother's back. *Mom, mom, mom*. But she didn't wake up. Her vision kept vanishing.

And finally it was pure white.

Everything was white.

She had come to a different world.

Her intuition told her so.

That her body didn't exist there.

Neither her hands, eyes, nor her legs.

No visual or textual senses.

As though she had become the 'white' herself.

She tried speaking to test out the waters, but she had no mouth to do so, so she couldn't. Even though she felt like crying, she had no eyes to do so.

Everything was…white.

There was nothing.

Only pure white.

Surprise had won over fear in her heart. *What is this? Where have I landed?* These questions spiraled inside her.

Her vision returned just as suddenly as it had faded away.

Colors returned to Asumi's world.

That was scary…Asumi felt relieved. She could see. There were colors. And sensations. …*Mn?*

Mm?

Her sense of touch hadn't returned.

Moreover...the scenery spreading before her was completely different from the one she had last perceived.

Her mother wasn't there.

Where am I...?

She didn't know this place.

Was it some kind of ruins? It was dim and had the kind of atmosphere a ghost house would. Timber, glass shards, and styrofoam were scattered on the floor...was this a factory?

Her 'vision' lowered against her will. As though she was watching a TV screen.

Now there was a girl crouching in that lowered field of vision.

Her face was twitching in fear. Her hair reaching her hips were in disarray. Her lips had short spasms. She was pleading something in desperation while looking this way with fright in her eyes, but Asumi couldn't hear her voice. She felt like she was watching a silent film.

Her vision silently swayed sideways. Was that body...shaking its head? But Asumi had no memories of making that motion. It was once again moving against her will.

The girl suddenly opened her eyes wide. She paused, then opened her mouth wide (probably to scream) and tried to crawl away. Her legs must've been shaking; she was crawling less gracefully than a baby.

Her vision slightly tilted up and down. It was following the girl trying to run away. ...*Oh*, *I am walking*, Asumi intuited.

She quickly closed in on the girl. She then saw her right arm rising in a corner of her vision.

That hand was holding something.

Something glinting.

It was a knife.

A mundane knife lacking in any style, the kind one could find at any general retailer. The handle was probably in wood, and the blade measured seven to eight centimeters.

It got swung down onto the girl,

And the image cut there.

Her vision returned to normal.

All her senses too.

She was looking at her mother's back.

Am I...back?

Like so, for no reason, Asumi had suddenly gained the ability to 'connect' with that man's eyes.

9

Lapping on her mint chocolate ice cream, Touko commented on how much free time uni students have.

I considered punching her, but I knew she hadn't said it out of malice, plus the sight of her licking the ice cream was surprisingly cute, so I didn't carry it out.

"I'm a model student, I'll have you know." Touko and I were seated on a bench. It was only morning, but the bench was already warm. "Also...you're not in a position to talk about others, are you?"

"Eh?"

"Aren't you skipping school to eat ice cream?"

"You can't really call that skipping when it's still Summer vacation."

"Eh? I mean, given that uniform I figured..."

"It's for club activities."

"Right."

"Also, it's only natural to keep company with the person who protected my chastity."

"Well that's admirable of you."

I said, taking a lick of my ice cream.

“Of course. After all, you extended my lifespan, Kagami-san.”

“No need to exaggerate.”

“Ah, right, Kagami-san,” she took her tongue away from her ice cream. “Could you give me your signature later?”

“Huh?”

“To commemorate.”

“...Yeah?” At that moment, I felt like there was nothing more wise, beautiful, and lying without any reason than a woman’s heart. “If I feel like it.”

“Where were you headed, Kagami-san?” Touko asked. She was quick on changing topics. “Since you took an early train despite not having school...”

“Right. You see, I was tailing someone.”

“Tailing! Wow...” she seemed inspired for some reason. She probed further with such fervor she almost let her ice cream fall. “Who were you tailing?”

“Someone related to the person who killed a member of my family.”

“Hardboiled to the max!”

What’s that? I’d never heard that word.

“Like for an egg?”

“Are you asking that for real?”

“Eh?”

“Ah...no, it’s fine.”

“Is it.” I gnawed on my ice cream’s cone. “Well...so you see, I’m busy. I’m not as free as you think I am.”

“Ah right, I’m sorry for taking up your time.”

Touko frowned and flapped her slender legs up and down. Her loafers resonated on the stone path.

“It’s fine, you bought me ice cream so I’ll let it slide.”

“Is tailing fun?”

“What? ...Of course not. It’s horrible.”

“The worst?”

“The worst.”

“But,” Touko said casually, “you feel fulfilled, don’t you?”

“Fulfilled?”

“It’s getting really hot, huh. Oh my…it’s already half past seven.” Time really flew by. “You see, I hate Summer.”

“Why the hell would you think I feel fulfilled?” It rubbed me the wrong way for some reason. No…rather, it got me curious. “I’m not feeling fulfilled in the slightest, just so you know.”

“Why are you angry?” Touko widened her eyes. “Did I say something strange?”

“Who knows. Beats me.”

“I really think you feel fulfilled right now,” Touko repeated, then ran her tongue across her ice cream. “I mean, no matter how you spin it, tailing the person who killed a family member *has* to be fulfilling.”

“Did you believe what I said?”

I was surprised. Were young people that pure (naive) nowadays?

“Eh, was it a lie?”

“No, it was mostly true, but still… And for the thing about it being fulfilling…I’m not sure I buy it. I feel like it’s different from a purpose in life. Well, not like I would know.”

“It is your purpose in life!”

“Hey, don’t assert it for me.”

“Eh heh heh. But I’m envious you have a purpose.”

She took a bite out of her ice cream.

“Do you want one yourself?”

“Hmm. If I had to say, I would rather have value in my life.”

“Value huh, that’s quite the ambition,” I commented honestly. “That’s proof you’re still young. Probably.”

“Would massacring your family’s murderer give your life value, Kagami-san?”

Thinking that way was indeed possible. However, what in the world was there to gain by decorating one's life with superficial meaning or value? Well, rejecting delusions is easier than even killing a cat, but denying everything just because it's easy would be nonsense too...well, I should stop there. This cogitation was meaningless.

"Maybe..." I took a bite of my cone. The sunshine was strong so I wanted to finish it quickly. "Well, if you want to think that, go ahead."

"Geez, that's so sloppy," Touko laughed. "Poor me for having my life's benefactory be such a sloppy person." Then, instead of retrieving their normal composure, her eyes took an allure best described as of resignation. "Still...if that man had done anything more to me, I would rather be dead."

"Are you still saying that? You're safe now, where's the problem?"

"But...I might run into the same situation in the future."

Touko sounded genuinely concerned.

"Aren't you learning aikido? Just kill them."

"But I'm still weak in fights."

"Channel your anxiety into actual energy. Have you ever read Murakami Ryu?"

"I know of Sakamoto Ryuichi, if that counts," she answered with a straight face. "Aah...just thinking about it gives me cold sweats." Her face turned pale. She seemed seriously frightened. "Having a greasy old man like that assault and rape me...just the thought of it makes me sick. I would rather be dead."

Assaulted.

Raped.

Sana entered my brain.

She had been raped by greasy old men too.

If she'd known in advance that something so terrible would befall on her, would Sana have said she would 'rather be dead' like Touko?

"You're sure tough on old men, huh."

I forced myself to voice a casual remark.

“Of course I am,” she said like it was the most obvious thing. “They are like cockroaches. Everyone in that age range is, to us.”

“Ouch.”

She was going off.

“I mean…you can’t blame me for thinking that way. Most molesters and perverts are in that age range, after all.”

“Well, they might be, but…”

“I would rather be dead.”

Touko lowered her gaze.

“If you don’t want to die, you gotta do your best.”

“At what?”

She directed her big eyes to me.

“Beats me,” I averted my eyes for some reason. “Say, do you like jelly beans?”

“Eh? Why that question?”

“Ah…there’s no real meaning to it.”

“Geez, you’re really sloppy… Ah,” her ice cream fell and hit the ground. The blue sphere turned into something ugly. To top it off, it was proudly wearing the cone as a dunce hat. “Oops… What a waste, ghosts will come for me,” she said and poked at the cone with the tip of her shoe.

“So clumsy, gee.”

“Eh heh heh,” she laughed shily. “I’m sorry.”

I suddenly realized that Touko reminded me of Sana and found myself flabbergasted.

Aah!

Why was I so abhorrent?!

“Is something wrong? You’re making a weird face.”

“Nothing…”

I forced the rest of my ice cream inside my mouth, then stood up.

“Eh? Are you going already?”

Touko looked up at me.

“Yeah, thanks for the ice cream.”

I managed to speak while dealing with all the ice cream inside my mouth.

“Please…let’s chat some more. This has to be fate, I’m sure.”

Touko stood up.

“Go to your club.”

“I’m skipping today.”

“Is that your purpose in life?”

“What?”

“See you then…bye bye.”

10

After that, I still went to observe Mikuni Akiko but didn’t get any meaningful information. I only saw Mikuni Akiko, wearing her school uniform with a memorable check pattern on the skirt, leaving through the main gate after finishing her club activities and boarding a black Rolls-Royce with her small stature closer to that of a middle schooler. The current time was exactly noon.

I went home on the same train line Touko and I had met on. Luckily, as far as I could tell, there were no molesters on the way back.

I arrived at my apartment and I laid down on my bed after taking a shower. Geez, my plans for today had been wasted. Well…at least I’d gotten to unwind a bit in exchange for a day’s worth of my time. Let’s leave it at that.

Plus, I doubt investigating during that time would’ve improved the situation. Neither of the girls would behave any different today, tomorrow, or the day after. Their commutes to school were too standardized. Their routes or schedules wouldn’t change unless they find themselves a lover or spears start raining down on the city.

It seemed wiser to take a different approach. But…what could I do? They were out of my reach inside their schools, and even more so after they went back home. Mikuni Akiko had piano lessons on Mondays, Wednesdays, and

Fridays, as well as English classes on Tuesdays. Ketouin Yuika had flower arrangement lessons on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays (it was all written in the notes I'd gotten from Ootsuki, and I had checked it myself). But the problem was with the people driving them to and from those places.

I spent about 30 seconds seriously considering getting a teaching license. But it was a quick no. Just a stupid and foolish idea. Aah…it really wasn't going as smoothly as with Pokémons. Reality was filled with hardships to overcome. Is that why everyone tries to escape into fiction?

Whatever. Truly amazing ideas come down onto you when you least expect it. So I would just wait for that. I bet Edison had the same mindset.

Now…break time, over.

I silently got out of bed.

It was finally time for the worst time of the day.

I grabbed my keys and got into my car. I bought food and sanitary products from a department store on the way. Needless to say, for the whole duration my mood was as bright as the light shining onto the Titanic after it sank to the bottom of the sea. I liked saying things that don't need to be said.

It was already past seven when I arrived at the hospital. I parked my car in the same spot as last time and entered the building, a flashlight in my right hand and two (insanely heavy) grocery bags in my left hand.

I arrived in front of room 206.

As far as I could tell from there, nothing seemed out of place.

I unlocked the padlock.

I was stupidly stressed.

My heart was beating like crazy.

My chest felt heavy.

I was sweating.

I genuinely wanted to run away.

I genuinely wanted to run away.

I genuinely wanted to run away.

Even so, I opened the door.

Inside…it was dim.

And moldy.

I spotted a dark silhouette near the blockaded window.

“Yo,” I pointed my flashlight at that person’s chest. I tried to sound as cheerful as I could. I wanted to hide how I was trembling down to my throat. “I left you hanging, huh. Sorry for that. I mean it.”

“…Who are you?”

Her voice sounded more skeptical and resentful than scared.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you? I mean, of course you are. You haven’t ingested a thing all day. But don’t worry, I bought you CalorieMate bars and onigiri.” I remembered I could be talkative. “Ah, I got you Evian as mineral water, do you drink that?”

“Who are you?”

“Oh, before I forget. For the restroom…let me see,” I put down the grocery bags and sifted through them. “Use this portable toilet. …Though I guess it’s too dark for you to see. Oh, by the way, this bag is for the garbage and this one for burnable—”

“Who the hell are you?!”

“Don’t scream,” her shout actually helped me calm down. “Weren’t you taught how to keep your mouth shut in preschool?”

I took out an emergency candle and lit it with the lighter. A dim light filled the room. The boundary between light and dark stayed vague enough to produce a comfortable atmosphere. I put the candle down near my feet.

Toudou Yumie was seated on the folding chair. She was squinting her eyes at the light she hadn’t been gifted with for a while. Her handcuffed left arm seemed in pain. Her uncombed hair was somewhere in disarray, but her powerful eyes hadn’t lost their luster.

“Hey…I still don’t understand what’s going on.” The range of Toudou Yumie’s voice was surprisingly low. And she was quite blunt. “Can you give me a proper explanation? Also these handcuffs. What’s my situation right now?”

"...*Situation*? Oh, the situation...your situation, right. To put it simply, you're detained. Ah, no," I panicked and added, "though that's only if we need to use such a word to describe it. Don't take it too directly. Uhh, it's just, you know, for reference." Yeah, I had no idea what I was saying. Calm down, me, calm down.

"Detained... What? Was I kidnapped?"

"Preposterous!" I raised a voice loud enough to surprise myself. I shook my hands. "That is firmly and absolutely not the case, I swear."

"But detaining and kidnapping someone aren't that different, are they?"

"I don't know, maybe, but..."

"Either way, you're behind it, right?"

She said in a hostile voice.

"Well, yeah..."

"I see." Toudou Yumie was staring at my face. Her face shaded by the candle was really scary. "So you're the one who assaulted me back then."

"Back then? Oh...that. Yeah. Stun guns are amazing, don't you think?"

"Hurry up and remove these handcuffs," Toudou Yumie glared at me and shook her left hand. The handcuffs and the metal chair raised metallic sounds as they collided. "Don't you realize it's blocking my blood flow and will cost me my arm?"

"You're exaggerating."

"Geez, what were you thinking..." Toudou Yumie was still glaring at me. "Creep..."

"Now, now, let's calm down. I bet you're only irritated because you're hungry." I didn't want to anger Toudou Yumie any further. Being rebuked like that was tough for my heart. I couldn't endure much of it. "No need to hold back, go ahead...eat a CalorieMate or something."

I took out a CalorieMate from its box and presented it to Toudou Yumie. However, she flung my hand away and rejected it. The CalorieMate fell to the floor and broke into two.

The candle's flame swayed.

"...Come on, no need to be that angry."

"Anyone would be mad in my position!" Toudou Yumie raised a voice like the sharp tip of a scissors. "Hurry up and set me free. Moron. Pervert."

"Again, you're exaggerating..."

"Aren't I right, though? You abducted a woman and caged her. You're a full-fledged criminal."

"Well, a crime is a crime, sure."

I could admit that.

"See? Criminals are the worst of the worst. Absolute scums"

"Exactly."

I couldn't agree more.

"Huh? 'Exactly'?" Toudou Yumie was surprised at how easily I agreed with her. "You're really creepy. Don't come any closer. And who the hell are you? ...Ah, don't tell me...are you Jack the Stabber?"

"How rude."

Jack the Stabber was the appelation of the mass murderer who has been disturbing society (of course, a small-scale disturbance) for many years.

"How is it rude? Because I'm right?"

"Shut up," I felt annoyed. Now I looked like the bad guy...well, I guess I was the bad guy for Toudou Yumie. "Don't put me in the same bag as that deranged psycho."

"You are the same to me."

"I know, shut up."

"Say, where are we?"

"Who knows."

"Will you let me go home?"

"God no."

"What do you want?"

Toudou Yumie was acting quite brazen for someone who was kidnapped by a stranger. Was her spirit that strong and resilient? Or was she charging ahead blindly to escape from fear?

“Err…rr, what do I want?”

I asked back.

“Yes, what you are planning to do with me.”

“What I’m planning to do?”

“Yes…” her voice was increasingly more tense. She curled her back and put herself on guard. “You’re a pervert, so it’s not like you’re done after abducting me, right? Are you?”

“…What the fuck are you saying?”

I was genuinely confused.

“I’m asking what you’ll do to me!”

“I told you to stop screaming.”

Aah, geez, why did women’s screams get on my nerves so much? Was that part of their strategy?

“You will surely rape me,” Toudou Yumie was almost frowning hard enough to form a right triangle with her eyes. “…You can’t deny it, huh. You’re going to rape me, aren’t you? Heh, if that’s what you’re after, go ahead…have your way. That’s your goal, isn’t it? I guess your shitty brain is smaller than an inse—”

Toudou Yumie’s words cut there. No surprise, since I gave her stomach a flying kick.

“Guh.”

Although she didn’t throw up on the spot, it seemed to have been efficient enough as she pressed her hands against her stomach with a grimace.

“Cut it off!” I had marvelously run out of patience. “Who the fuck is a rapist?! That would rather be your fucking gangraping shitbag of a dad! Don’t put me in the same bag as these scums!”

“…It hurts.”

Toudou Yumie was resisting the pain by holding her stomach. She probably intended to curl up her whole body, but the handcuffs on her left hand prevented her from accomplishing her aim, so she was left in a strange position. Serves her right.

“No joke. I kicked your stomach.”

“You didn’t have to go that far,” Toudou Yumie looked up at me. Her visage was in pain. “You brute.”

“You really never stop talking, huh.”

“Hey, um…what did you mean earlier?” Toudou Yumie asked, still grimacing.

“Earlier?”

“That my dad was a gangraping shitbag, what do you mean exactly?”

Toudou Yumie’s pupils were shaking.

“I mean what I said. Your dad raped my little sister.”

“Raped…?”

Toudou Yumie’s lips trembled for an instant.

“Yeah.”

“Your little sister…?”

“Yeah.”

“…I see. So that’s why you captured me?”

“Eh? Ah, hey…slow down,” I was flustered. “Why are you accepting that so easily? Did you hear me right? I’m saying your dad is a rapi—” it came to me all of a sudden. “…You knew?”

Toudou Yumie didn’t answer.

“You knew your dad was a rapist, didn’t you?”

“…I didn’t exactly know,” she averted her eyes from me and bit her lips. “It’s just that…I had noticed my dad and his friends were doing something shady. But I never imagined it would be rape… Say, is this really true?”

“It sure is,” I answered while gritting my teeth. “They raped her at three.”

“How do you know that?”

Toudou Yumie looked at me dubiously.

“Well, I got an informant. I learned everything through them.”

“How old is your little sister?”

“Fifteen.”

“Disgusting…”

“That’s a lot coming from you.”

“Shut up,” she retrieved her thorny way of speaking. “I had nothing to do with it, did I?”

“You’re not involved so you don’t care whatever happens?”

“I didn’t say that…”

“Here,” I placed the grocery bag before Toudou Yumie. “It has water, food, and sanitary products, use that to survive.”

“Hey…hold on! We’re not done talking yet!”

Toudou Yumie pulled on her handcuffs again and again. The metallic noise echoed in the room.

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Hold on!”

“Selfish much?” I put up the more scornful sneer I could manage. “Oh, right. Once that candle runs out you can bid goodbye to light until morning comes around.”

“Huh? Don’t joke around. Give me access to the other candles at least.”

“You might burn up the building, so no.”

I wanted to eliminate sources of concern as much as possible.

“As if I would do something so stupid. Hey, please,” Toudou Yumie showed me an expression of fear for the first time. Was the night more scary than me to her? “I beg you, that’s too much…”

I left the room.

Not finding an ounce of reluctance within myself.

11

Her second connection happened three months after the first one.

Asumi was bathing. She was following the duck that had been living in that bathroom forever with her eyes as it swam across the hot water, when her vision started to fade away, again, abruptly. Asumi hurriedly tried to get out of the bathtub to seek help from her family in the living room, but her vision

fully disappeared before she could get more than her upper body out of the water.

She returned to the blank world she'd experienced three months prior.

A world devoid of matter or sensations.

Of everything…but white.

A world only composed of white.

After a little while, just like the last time, she started seeing things from someone else's perspective (there were other viable theories, but at the time Asumi intuited that was what was happening).

This time it was in a back alley. There were no street lights so it was exceedingly dark. She couldn't decipher the situation. It was no different than a dark forest.

She spotted something moving ahead.

That was a person…a woman.

She couldn't make out her attire, hairstyle, or age because of the darkness and because she was pretty far and not facing this way, but Asumi was positive they were a woman.

Ah, she thought.

That's because she feared he (from this moment onward, she started referring to the individual at the other end of the connection as 'he') was going to do something unacceptable (she didn't want to use the word murder) to her.

She recalled the last connection.

She couldn't have forgotten it. He was about to swing down a knife at a girl in what seemed to be a factory. Asumi had seen similar scenes in movies many times, however, that one permeated with a strange sense of tension that couldn't be felt through screens.

She didn't want to witness the same thing again. Never ever. Moreover, the last one had cut right before the actual murder took place, but…there was no guarantee the same would apply this time. She tried to close her eyes with all her might, but *he* was the owner of that vision. Her struggles were futile.

Her chaotic train of thought, entrapped in a crevasse between resignation and resistance, came to stop for a single moment.

The woman walking ahead turned his way…towards the man and stood still.

However, the man didn't seem flustered, he continued walking towards her at the same pace. Asumi wanted to scream, "Hurry up and escape, he's going to kill you! Quick!" but the man had complete ownership of that mouth too.

The woman then…did something completely unexpected.

Instead of running away, she trotted over to him.

With a smile.

As though she was a lost lamb grabbing onto God's saving hand.

Asumi's mind, already confused and scared, was shaken even harder. *Why? Are they acquaintances?*

The girl's smile approached closer and closer.

The man's right arm moved.

A knife. The same as last time.

That same mundanity.

He swung it down.

The knife shining in the dark pierced through the girl's neck.

Deeply.

The connection was then severed.

Her vision returned.

The bath.

The duck toy.

12

Another aspect that proves automatic cars are superior is that they let you use your phone at the wheel.

"Hi… What do you want now, Nii-san?"

I asked curtly.

“Are you trying to sound angry?” he giggled. “Your acting is still as sucky as ever, Kimihiko. Or what, do you not like the idea of a third party understanding your feelings?”

“What do you want.”

“Your impressions.”

“On what?”

“Are you testing me perhaps? On your chat with the girl you kidnapped, what else?”

Okay…now it was confirmed.

Nii-san wasn’t bluffing. I didn’t know how, but he had a complete grasp on my actions. At least on the situation inside the ghost hospital.

“…When did you become a prophet? How do you know that?”

“I’m not a prophet. Only Ryouko has that ability.”

“But right now you…”

“That’s different.”

“How so?”

“These aren’t prophecies,” his voice emanating from the phone echoed strangely well inside my head. As though it was produced inside it. “Let me see, if I had to put it into words…I’m taking a peek.”

“She was far different from what I imagined,” I couldn’t be bothered so I answered honestly. “It left a bad taste in my mouth. It shouldn’t have gone down like that.”

“So you had a valuable exchange with Toudou Yumie, I see.”

“Kind of.” He even knew her name? Wow. “Though a lot of it was meaningless chatter,” I turned the wheel to the right while answering that. “Well, it wasn’t that bad for my first time.”

“Hmm. Then, ideally, how do you want things to develop next?”

“How? I don’t know.”

“Tell me, Kimihiko,” he said calmly, “why are you kidnapping these girls?”

"...Why?"

Why?

"Yes, I want to know your goal behind it. What do you intend on doing after kidnapping them? What do you wish for? What core ambition are you trying to fulfill?"

What I intended on doing?

"That's...I'm obviously doing this for revenge."

I declared, flustered.

"Then you should take it out directly on the men who raped Sana," Nii-san argued back without missing a beat. "I personally don't see any point in kidnapping their daughters or granddaughters."

"But reaching them is super hard. They're famous people or CEOs of big companies..."

"That's not a reason."

"...Errrr."

Huh?

What?

Why was I stumped?

"I'm in no place to judge other people's values so I won't go too far, but," my coward brother prefaced his point with a cowardly lead-in, "I find your behavior a bit too conceptual. At least in my eyes."

"According to your values, Nii-san, am I wrong?"

"Seeing the world as a duality between being correct or incorrect is something only a fool would do," he warned me with a calm voice, akin to that of a competent teacher. "The world isn't only made out of Kamen Rider and Shocker, you know?"

"Trying to escape with sophism?"

"No amount of cheap provocation will get to me."

"Sorry for that."

I frowned and stepped on the gas pedal. The car accelerated. If someone could feel happy in this situation, I'd love to see what they're made of.

“Kimihiko, did you go to Sana’s funeral?”

The question was asked nonchalantly, but given the contents, it wouldn’t be as inconsequential as decorations on a Christmas tree.

“No…I couldn’t make it.”

“And why couldn’t you make it?”

“…I mean, you know.”

“True. You do have the precedent of not attending Yuna’s funeral.”

“That’s not really why,” I justified myself. “It’s just that…there’s no point in confirming that Sana died, is there?”

“I can’t agree with you. If those left behind neglect the act of confirming a death, it can sometimes spell big trouble later on.”

“Heh, really?”

I thought it was trivial so I brushed the topic away.

“Sana would have hated you for not going to her funeral. I bet.”

“She might have…”

I adjusted my grip on the phone.

“‘I hate you! I hate everybody in this ocean!’”

Nii-san’s sudden scream caught me by surprise and caused me to put more weight on the pedal. I was about to collide with a car on the opposite lane, so I spun the wheel in panic. A grazing noise. It was a close one.

“Dummy… Don’t scream!” I was screaming too. “Hey, I nearly died here. And what the fuck do mean by ‘ocean’?”

“It’s Booper’s line, what else? Kimihiko, don’t tell me you don’t know Salinger.”

“Who do I not know?”

“Salinger,” he repeated. “Geez… I can’t believe you haven’t read Salinger at your age. I bet you’ve only read some low-brow stuff, haven’t you? Listen, Kimihiko, novels are heart-throbbing—”

I hung up. He had no rights to extol the greatness of novels when he hadn’t read a single page from Homer, Kafka, Charles Lamb, or Mori Ogai. Don’t

speak just from your imagination or sensations when you haven't read shit. I addressed no one in particular. Though that's a lie.

The car was nearing my apartment.

I felt a bit sleepy.

I had to wake up at dawn tomorrow too, so I should sleep early.

I pondered about what to do with the kidnapped girl.

I wondered about how I should interact with the kidnapped girl.

13

She had been killed.

Touko had been killed.

Asumi woke up and turned the TV on as was her habit. Kobayashi Touko. A familiar face. A familiar name.

Asumi had met her in high school. Touko was her underclassman in the same badminton club. Her personality was somewhat aloof compared to most people, but she wasn't hard to talk to or anything. She was actually so charming that Asumi had approached her first.

"Do you have a hobby, Touko-chan?"

"I do. Karate and Jaken."

"Jaken?"

"Does Drunken Fist ring a bell then?"

"Err, like Jackie Chan?"

"Well I'm underage, so that one is off the list."

"...Yeah?"

"May I try to guess yours?"

"Eh? Sure..."

"Eh heh heh. How would I know?"

Asumi couldn't tell if there was any deeper meaning or not to it, but that conversation was the start of their friendship. They often talked during club activities. They even went shopping together at times. When Asumi

graduated, Touko even lied to her, saying she would join the same university. That's the memories she had with Touko. The remembrances.

And all of that had been shattered.

Shattered by him.

Hatred was surging up from her heart.

That was the first personal emotion she ever felt towards him.

Until then, she had only been afraid.

She'd only trembled at his shadow.

A terrifying monster. A terrifying monster.

However…that came to an end today.

She couldn't afford to stay frightened any longer.

…She would confront him.

She was resolved.

This was no longer just to escape from his grasp, but also to avenge Touko.

Quite the admirable goal. A part of Asumi's heart was sneering.

She silently stood up and took out from her desk's drawer an envelope she'd received from him but had been too scared to open until now. She opened it with a paper knife that had a bear's face printed on the handle. This time it contained a polaroid in addition to the usual letter. That was a first.

'Are you sad that a friend died?'

Don't say the obvious.

Asumi ripped the letter and threw it away.

She then grabbed the photograph.

It showed Touko's corpse with a knife planted in her neck, like all previous victims.

Her originally-white sailor uniform was drenched red, and her skin had turned bluish. Her thighs visible below her skirt were morbidly sexy.

Despite glaring at the polaroid, Asumi was still serene. Well, of course she would be. The body in the frame was no different than a puppet by now. The source of her grief didn't come from that. Only characters from TV series would go mad when shown such a photograph.

However, Asumi put the polaroid showing what had previously been Touko down on her desk and covered her eyes. No matter how logical her reasoning was, she couldn't stop tears from forming. Asumi wiped away these tears, reflecting on how illogical a being she was, then cheered herself up before her resolve could falter. *Crying won't do anything, weren't you going to avenge her? Then stop that and focus all your energy on thinking.*

Think.

Exactly, Asumi had to think.

Think of a way to reach him…

To put some order to her meandering thoughts, Asumi took out the sketchbook where she'd collected all articles she could find regarding the Jack the Stabber Case from the same drawer.

This contained all confirmed pieces of information up to this point in time…ever since the start of the case on September 9th 1999. That day, Hasegawa Yukiko (17 years old then), living in Otaru City, Hokkaido, was found murdered in a park near her house, a knife stabbed through her neck, at 11 PM on the same day as the murder. Since she hadn't come back after leaving the house to play earlier that day, her mother got worried and went searching around the house, becoming the first to discover the corpse. The estimated time of death was between 7 and 9 PM. There were no abnormalities with her belongings or clothes. Hasegawa Yukiko had been killed somewhere else, then abandoned in the park. The weapon used was a normal knife available in all retailers across the country, so it couldn't help identify the culprit. Naturally, there were no fingerprints left on it.

On the 18th of October, the second victim came out in Otaru City as well. Her name was Arai Yuuko (15 years old then). She had been abandoned on the bank of the river going through the city, a knife planted in her neck yet again, where she was discovered by an old man passing by on his morning walk. She was seen for the last time by her friends at 4:40 PM the previous day as she was headed for the cram school near her house, but disappeared before making it there. Her estimated time of death was between 6 and 9 PM.

Nothing amiss in her belongings and no traces of violence. The knife was of the same type as the one used to murder Hasegawa Yukiko.

The year rolled over, and on the 24th of January 2000, his area of operations moved to the Honshu region. Saitou Eri (19 years old then), an office worker in Zama City, Kanagawa, was stabbed in the neck in the sports ground of an elementary school near her workplace, and discovered later that day at 10:30 AM by a few students who had come to play during their free hour. Saitou Eri was last seen leaving her company by her manager at 5:10 PM on the 23rd. Her estimated time of death was around 9 PM. As always, there was nothing abnormal with her belongings or clothes. Collecting fingerprints proved impossible since one of the students who had discovered her corpse had touched the knife (it obviously wouldn't have detected anything anyway). Also, the knife was of the same type as the ones used the previous times. The joke nickname 'Jack the Stabber' started appearing around then. The case gained in popularity.

Then, on the 28th of the same month, in Odawara City in the same prefecture, Fujimoto Miyuka (17 years old then) was found, with a knife planted in her neck, in a landfill on the side of a road near her house by a man during his jogging at dawn. Her estimated time of death was between 11 PM on the 27th and 1:30 AM on the next day. No anomalies in her belongings or clothes, as always. And obviously the knife was of the same type...

This manga-like case continued from 1999 to the current year, 2007, without any big breaks between the murders.

Naturally, all murders were his deeds.

The number of victims amounted to 77 in 2007. A mad pace. A simple calculation tells us he had killed one every 38 days on average. It might seem low when put like that, but it was no laughing matter. The fact that 77 women were murdered over 8 years in the constitutional state of Japan was unheard of.

And among these 77 murders…Asumi had witnessed 52 of them up-close through connections (the reason wasn't clear, but she didn't seem to connect when she was sleeping. Or she just didn't remember).

The fact that all knives were the same seemed, the lack of sexual assault (the police hasn't announced it officially, but many media claimed that. Was he not interested in their bodies?), the lack of theft, and other shared aspects led the police to investigate the case as carried by one person. However, it's not so easy to solve a case with no witnesses or proof, so the culprit hadn't been caught yet (still, isn't it too much to not have any lead after eight years of investigation?).

There was a time Asumi aimed to take it upon herself to become a detective and solve the case herself through her special power, but she couldn't freely control her connections, and even when could connect, it always started right before the murder and ended right after it; it never occurred at any other time.

But she couldn't give up anymore.

Now she had to avenge Touko.

Still, how could she investigate his identity? She'd never gotten any relevant hint from what reflected in his vision (though it would be a dead giveaway if he committed a crime in a room with a mirror). And the murdered girls didn't know each other, so investigating from the victim side wasn't any easier.

The victims had no correlation.

Jack the Stabber's victims were girls ranging from 15 to 19 years old. Among the 77 girls, some were acquainted with others, and some weren't. At first the police was grappling with that problem of correlation in earnesty, but in the past 2-3 years they had (apparently) been avoiding questions on that subject during press conferences. They probably thought that it wouldn't be surprising for connections to emerge given the huge number of victims. And they were right.

If the victims didn’t know each other, was he sampling random girls…were his deeds indiscriminate?

In fact, his operation range extended from Hokkaido in the north to Kyushu in the south, so basically the entire Japanese territory.

People with no common feature other than their gender were killed in dispersed regions.

No common features emerged.

Therefore they were indiscriminate murders.

Jack the Stabber’s identity was as diverse as the number of magazines talking about the case, but when it came to the question of motive they all claimed a lack of reason and satisfied themselves with calling them indiscriminate murders. The college professors, psychiatrists, and criminologues that appeared on TV every day, and even Asumi’s surroundings were all repeating the same thing. That seemed to be the common opinion.

It was abnormal.

At least it was clear that the media were convinced the murders were indiscriminate. Asumi closed the scrapbook, internally hoping the police weren't so foolish in their assumptions. *Right, no one would murder 77 people for such a stupid reason. There has to be something.* A groundless conviction.

Asumi sat on the chair, set her elbows on the desk, and resumed her train of thoughts. He hadn’t given the police any clues in eight years (presumably). Asumi found it laughable that a mere college student was intending on catching that genius criminal…self-deprecatingly.

She was submerged with more useless thoughts than she could deal with, and yet she couldn’t come up with a great idea to reach him.

…I knew it.

I guess I have to rely on connections.

Connections.

She had grown used to them (yes, the notion of ‘growing accustomed’ exists in any world), but she still hated them from the bottom of her heart.

Nothing is as chilling as fusing with someone else.

Especially when that someone is a murderer.

Why is he killing girls...?

What reason—what reasoning is there at the core?

It can't be the vapid reason given by the media.

Asumi was curious.

She wanted to take a peek at the *insides* of the person threatening her.

The polaroid showing Touko's corpse stood out to her in a corner of her vision. According to talk shows, yesterday—the 21st of August—Touko had left her house in the evening and never came back; her corpse was discovered late at night on the same day by a student on the way back from his part-time job in an empty plot of land, with a knife stabbed in her neck.

The police had yet to officially announce this was the deed of Jack the Stabber, but the three-minute TV program *Today's Jack the Stabber Report*—which was heavily criticized by the PTA and Human rights protection groups, but ironically maintained a high viewership and a prosperous runtime—had greatly suggested that possibility, though it didn't fully assert it; so the media must have had some proof to be that confident.

Thinking of a reality where she had to glue articles on Touko's death in the scrapbook ached her heart beyond reason.

...Touko.

Asumi retained her tears yet again.

I should sleep for now.

At least I can't cry while I'm asleep.

14

"I hate the dark, seriously."

"Well sorry for that."

“Plus the heat is killing me… The room is kept closed in peak Summer time, of course it gets like a sauna from morning to evening. Hey, did you know that?”

“Isn’t that ideal for a quick diet?”

“I’m already thin so no thank you. Hey, the heat made me feel sick, can you remove that plank?”

“That, I can’t.”

“Please, I beg you… I’m drenched in sweat too, it’s awful.”

“Here, I bought you some gyudon from Yoshinoya to make up for it.”

“First, remove these handcuffs.”

“Nah, I can’t do that.”

“I’m not a criminal.”

“Really?”

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Why do *I* have to go through that?”

“Why…?”

“I mean, it’s my dad who raped your little sister. So abduct him instead. Just abduct him and put him through torture until he dies.”

“My, my, this family love is moving me to tears.”

“Don’t make fun of me. I’m being serious here.”

“That wasn’t really my intention.”

“So, why? Why are you doing this to me? Give me a reason.”

“…A reason…”

“Yes. There must be some meaning behind why you abducted me and not my dad, right? So why did you do that?”

“…Meaning…”

“Aah geez…what now? What’s wrong with you?”

“Um, can you tell me why everyone’s only thinking about that stuff? All these meanings or reasons or whatever.”

“Huh? Don’t ask such basic questions, please! You’re so creepy… Geez, I haven’t done anything wrong, have I? I’ve never even seen your little sister. She’s a total stranger to me! Come on…hurry up and set me free already!”

“…”

Chapter 3

Still Do Not Look At It

1

Waking from an anxiety-inducing dream only to be hit with the fact you have become a giant, monstrous vermin—so to experience the same as Gregor Samsa—is the most amazing, worst thing that can happen, but when I read Hideshi Hino's *The Bug Boy*, I found myself not too reluctant at the idea of becoming one. However…I only just thought that, and in reality, I would hate it.

I crawled out of bed to accomplish what had become my daily chore: tailing. Then, after washing my face and brushing my teeth like Ultraman (my heart cools down after three minutes), I changed into random clothes from my closet and left the apartment behind. 24th of August. A rare cloudy sky. I knew it, a world with some darkness here and there was much more comfortable than one shone onto by a bottomless light. Was that because of my mental state?

…Huh?

I was in a…weirdly good mood.

And bizarrely jovial.

I'd only realized that now.

Well, whatever.

Arriving at Sapporo Station, I switched to a subway, then pedaled my way to the front of Ketouin Yuika's manor with a bike I'd stolen in front of the station. That manor was meaninglessly immense. It was built in a way reminiscent of old Japanese houses, but the scale of the building completely ignored all aesthetics proper to them. How in the world was it in any way necessary to build such a big house? I asked myself the same question every time I saw it. It was way over the line to just sum it up as rich people showing off their fortune. …Right, I had no time to admire the house.

After checking my surroundings, I entered the residence facing the manor—basically a rabbit hutch in comparison—and hid in-between the

shrubs in its garden. I could observe the entrance without anyone finding me suspicious from here. Though I would look extremely suspicious, if spotted.

I then stared at the manga-like, way-over-the-top door leading to the Ketouin domain, feeling dangerously restless. Restless...no, rather, merry.

However...I didn't get why I was feeling merry at all. Had the exhaustion from the tailing accumulated and affected me like runner's high? Even aware of it, it was still pretty uncanny to think an unknown emotion was resting within me.

After waiting for a bit, the manga-like, way-over-the-top door opened like in an over-the-top manga. I'd gotten used to it over time, but I was really flabbergasted the first time I'd seen this scene unfold. I was overwhelmed by the might of sheltered, rich ladies.

A silver Mercedes (it's cool they went out of their way to not choose a black Rolls-Royce) passed through the door and entered the lower realm, home to peasants.

My tension manifested in my heart's furious beating.

My body was buried deep in the bushes.

However, my eyes were wide open.

The Mercedes turned right and passed right in front of the bush I was hiding in.

Less than five meters from me.

As usual, Ketouin Yuika was seated on the right back seat.

Her smooth and long black hair.

Her white skin.

Her expressionless face.

And her pupils, surrounded by black irises as mellow as an herbivore's.

The more I looked at her...the prettier a girl she seemed.

During the few seconds it took the car to pass before me, my eyes were glued to Ketouin Yuika for the whole time.

...Huh?

2

Low life.

Scum.

Why is the human mind so greedy...I shifted the blame. There's no easier escape route than shifting the blame onto something else.

When I got in my car to make a trip back to the apartment, I started taking detours meaninglessly. That action would commonly be called going for a drive, but sadly I didn't have such noble intentions at the moment. What do you want, I was already too busy being fed up at how stupid I was to even look at the clouds I loved so much. And since I was driving at random, I wasn't sure at all what street I was on.

Still, I'd made some progress, all in all.

I'd finally uncovered the truth behind that inexplicable emotion haunting me.

But it wasn't one I could acknowledge so easily. No, the emotion in itself was fine, it was more like, how should I put it...the fact that I'd stooped to developing such emotions, plus how guilty I felt towards Sana... Anyway, many complex emotions I couldn't summarize concisely were making a mess in my head, so I was quite confused. And confusion of that scale needs to be treated with utmost caution as there is always a risk for it to inflate.

I kept driving as though I was setting off on a divine crusade. The people, the road, and the sky all blurred into one in my hazy mind. Nothing stood out or emerged. Everything was equally broken. Someone like that shouldn't be driving a car. That's dangerous.

I was confident.

I was probably...no, assuredly, in love with Ketouin Yuika.

I was convinced.

It was love at first sight...though I had already seen a picture of her, so technically speaking it wasn't at first sight.

Ahhh...fuck! The hell you mean, love?

Don’t say it so easily. Are you a moron?

She was the granddaugther of a guy who’d raped Sana, don’t forget.

She was merely a piece I would use to carry out my revenge.

And now you’re in love with that?

It didn’t sit well with me...

No, I just couldn’t accept it.

I didn’t want to apologize to Sana.

Aaah, what a mess. I’d never apologized even once to Sana while she was alive... Right, in the end, I’d never had any serious quarrel with her. No matter how twisted a person I could be, Sana had always dodged that with a smile. As though she was avoiding interacting with my deepest parts. And now I had no hopes of ever knowing why.

I felt melancholic.

I passed the front of a shopping district, a department store, then a pachinko parlor before hitting one of those red lights I despised so much. However, I couldn’t even muster the energy to act indignated. Being angry used a surprising amount of energy.

As I was waiting for the light to turn, I looked to the side on a whim.

There was a funeral home. In front of it, a group of youngsters about my age, wearing school uniforms (that was...the uniform from the school Mikuni Akiko attended). They were holding flowers. Apparently someone young had died.

Before I could feel sorry for them, a strange group stood out to me. Cameramen were lining up in front of the parking lot. Before them, a female announcer who often appeared on TV was having a briefing with a guy who seemed to be part of the staff.

The media. They had quite a few cameras. Had someone famous died? But who? I had no time to watch TV recently so I was about as knowledgeable as old men regarding young talents.

The light turned green. The Sedan in front of me accelerated. I tried to revert my gaze to the road. A famous person’s death had nothing to do with

me. If I ever heard the news of Shikoku sinking, I was confident I could brush it off with an uninterested *huh*.

But then, I spotted a familiar face in the corner of my vision.

What a coincidence.

God exists.

A middle schooler-size body.

Supple-looking hair.

That was Mikuni Akiko.

My organs made a standing ovation. A pearl in a library. Feeding botamochi to a pig. ...I guess the last one really made no sense, huh.

Mikuni Akiko was walking towards the hall's entrance with the gait of a fledgling. A semblance of grief on her juvenile yet well-featured face. She was either on the verge of tears or had just finished crying.

It was obvious what I should do next.

I turned left at the crossing then left again at the next one and entered the department store I'd just passed earlier. I parked in the parking lot and dashed inside. Once there, I inspected the place's floor plans to find where they sold menswear. I took the elevator to the second floor. The moment I reached that section, I grabbed a dark suit, a shirt, a necktie, and a belt at random. For a total of 58 thousand yen. It was definitely a scam at that price, but I bought it right away. I then bought cheap loafers at the shoe section next to it. Next, I searched for the stationery corner on the floor plans. Back to the elevator, now to the first floor. When I got there, I lost no time and bought a calligraphy pen, scissors, and a funeral offering.

I got in a toilet stall, cut the price tags with the scissors, and changed into the suit I'd just bought. I wrote my name on the offering and a Fukuzawa Yukichi quote. Of course using my real name would be dangerous, so I went with a fake one. Andou Naoki.[15]

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[15] The name of the main character from Kazuhiro Uraga's Andou Naoki Series. The series' first volume, *The End of Memory*, won the Mephisto Prize 3 years before Flicker Style did.

Leaving the department store, I bought apple juice from a vending machine then ran to my car. Putting on my seatbelt...here we go.

About 20 minutes had passed. Even Ayrton Senna couldn't beat my pace, I bet.

When I returned to the funeral home, men straight out of *Men in Black* (though they were all Japanese) guided my car. I followed their lead and eventually reached a parking lot. It was more crowded than I'd anticipated. I looked for a spot and parked there. I then took a deep breath and drank the whole brick of apple juice at once.

Okay, let's go.

They'd set up a white tent left of the funeral hall. I grabbed the funeral offering and trotted over to the reception. A woman clad in black stood up from her seat and bowed. I handed her the offering, wrote a random signature in the registry, and entered the hall.

The hall was as vast as a gymnasium and had folding chairs evenly spaced to each other. Most of the people there were wearing school uniforms (with a 2:8 men-women ratio). The same uniform. The same age. Finding Mikuni Akiko among them would be ten times harder than spotting Waldo. But this story wouldn't continue if I didn't. I looked out for Mikuni Akiko while taking care not to appear suspicious. Some were crying prematurely when the ceremony hadn't started yet, some were engrossed in talking, some had vacant looks of stupefaction on their faces...I could see many such cheerful faces, but no sign of Mikuni Akiko. Where the hell was she? Or was it someone else earlier... No, there's no way I'd gotten it wrong. I had definitely seen Mikuni Akiko. That was without a doubt Mikuni Akiko. My eyesight was excellent. That was on my character sheet.

I kept looking, but even so, I couldn't find Mikuni Akiko. A bit puzzled, I looked at the altar on my right. It wasn't very flashy. Rather, it was quite plain-looking. There was a portrait of a girl on a blue background in the center of it. Apparently she's the one who'd died. She was indeed pretty, but

didn't feel like an actress to me. So she wasn't a TV talent? Then what were the cameramen outside here for—

Ah.

What the fuck was I saying?

I had met her very recently, hadn't I?

How could I forget her memorable face?

There was no doubt. ...This girl was—

She was Touko.

Touko.

Touko had... Why?

Too much had happened today, I couldn't follow. I felt my brain reaching its breaking point for the first time in my life. That certainly didn't feel good.

As I was struggling processing the information inside my head, the organizer with a hunchback came out of the door next to the altar. Tsk, time over. I gave up and took a seat on an empty chair. High school girls left and right of me. So what?

The organizer grabbed the mic and informed us that Touko's funeral service was about to start. The hall went silent, but the sobbing or crying of girls didn't go away. I looked straight ahead in silence. Looking around when everyone was seated would draw too much attention. Why not take this occasion to change gears and pray for Touko a bit.

Once the organizer had solemnly announced the monk's entrance, a monk wearing a black robe (a decrepit man, old as dirt. He made me uncontrollably want to be snarky and tell him 'Shouldn't we all be reading sutras for *you*, rather?') came out of the room in the back. The monk sat on a thick, expensive-looking cushion, and started reading sutras. Temple blocks sounded kinda pleasant. *Chakapoko, chakapoko...*[16] The sutra recital lasted way

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[16] Reference to the iconic *Heretic Preaching for the Hell of the Lunatics, or The Lunatics' Age of Darkness* from Yumeno Kyuusaku's *Dogra Magra*, where Professor Masaki plays a broken-down temple block as he whistle-blows on the street against psychiatric hospitals. A healthy temple block would make a *poc poc* sound, but this one (and Professor Masaki's) make a *chakapoko* sound, somehow.

longer than I thought it would, and I was about to close my eyes and pass out. If the organizer had encouraged people to burn incense for Touko even three minutes later than he'd done, I would've been in dreamland right now.

First came the turn of the direct family and their relatives. People looking like Touko's father, Touko's mother, and Touko's big brother stood up from their chairs. My eyes were unconsciously drawn to Touko's brother.

According to Yuna, the centerpiece of the Kagami family and the eldest daughter who'd committed suicide…I was a genius at recognizing people of the same ilk as myself. And, well, I agreed with that. 'I can get on well with X,' 'X and I think in similar ways,' 'X and I are broken in the same way,' I had never once been wrong in such judgements.

So as I was looking at Touko's brother from afar, I was already confident he and I were on the same rails. Moreover, we were in the same situation of having our little sisters die recently. I suddenly felt an urge to give him a tap on the shoulder. But caution first and foremost. I held back. People who've had family members die recently (that includes myself) can get extremely violent. I sure didn't want to get punched because I said something weird.

Died…right.

How had Touko died?

Was it an accident, or…a suicide? The family and relatives had finished burning their incense while I was thinking. Next was the attendees' turn. Each row stood up in turn and went up the altar to burn incense. Such automatization taking place again and again was more than enough to dilute all meaning incense could have, and yet no one seemed to be complaining. I wasn't really indignated either. When it was my row's turn, I silently stood up and headed for the altar.

I formally sprinkled some weird stuff that looked like dead leaves on a thing I didn't know the name of from which smoke came out, then joined hands in the direction of the portrait…oh, I'd forgotten to buy a rosary. I closed my eyes and slightly hung my head. The Touko in the portrait had a warm smile as though she had no regrets left in life.

The monk held a long sermon before leaving the altar, then the family of the deceased made a speech full of hope—or grief, it wasn't clear; the ceremony was progressing smoothly.

The organizer spoke solemnly: *The coffin will now be carried out. We would like for all the attendees to see Miss Kobayashi Touko off, so please gather by the front door. Can the family of the deceased come to the altar...* The attendees left through the exit. I followed the flow. They opened the coffin's lid in front of the altar and the family inserted flowers inside. The guy who was probably Touko's brother was hanging his head near the wall.

Anyone would feel loquacious after staying silent for so long. The attendees standing near the front door were whispering and engaging in small talk while waiting for the coffin to be carried out. Eavesdropping on these conversations, I picked up on surprising news. My semicircular canals were thrown in disarray. Touko had apparently fallen victim to Jack the Stabber. That explained the presence of all these cameramen in front of the parking lot. For her, who loathed perverts, to have her life come to an end by the hands of Jack the Stabber, a psychotic pervert of the highest class (whose only dream in life was probably to be handed a medal of honor by Henry Lee Lucas), was something I bet she'd never once considered in her time on Earth. Seeing it under that light, it was even more pitiful.

After waiting for a bit, the plain-wood coffin was carried out of the hall. With the probably-father leading it, and the probably-mother following a bit behind, holding Touko's portrait against her chest. The probably-brother was even further behind.

The moment the coffin came into sight, the cameras' flashes submerged it. The announcer was making her live reportage at lightning speed. The brightness from the flashes and an indescriptible emotion made me squint my eyes slightly.

Touko's probably-father started making a speech. I paid no heed to it and resumed searching for Mikuni Akiko.

Searching. Searching. Searching. Searching...

And found.

My target was standing next to the funeral wreaths stationed near the wall.

She had shrunk her small body even smaller and was looking up at the clouds. How close were Mikuni Akiko and Touko? The organizer had said Touko died at age 17, so she was in the same grade as Mikuni Akiko. But…they sure didn't look like it. Mikuni Akiko's stature was small, so much that a child's backpack would suit her well. She must've been a premature baby. The fourth daughter of our family, Naomi, had been a premature baby too and, sure enough, she had a healthy, small body as well.

The hearse arrived. Its rear door, almost looking like a golden chimera, opened, and the coffin was inserted.

The flashes accentuated.

3

When the minibus carrying the family of the deceased and the hearse carrying the body left the funeral home, the attendees started dispersing.

Now…this was the real start for me.

Even after most of the attendees had left, Mikuni Akiko spent some time by the wreaths looking at the sky. She eventually closed her eyes, then slowly walked out of the premises.

I ran to the parking lot, ignoring the mics reporters pointed to me, quickly boarded inside, and took off. Mikuni Akiko was walking slowly so I didn't lose sight of her. What the heck, was she practicing jamming public events?

Mikuni Akiko was headed towards the residential area. I parked on the street, strongly praying no tow trucks would recover it. My black suit would stand out too much so I changed into my former clothes.

I got out of the car. It was cloudy today so it wasn't that hot outside. I patted the stun gun inside my jeans' back pocket from the outside.

It was noon on a weekday so there weren't many people around. Not many cars either. Alright…fate was completely on my side. I only had to keep it there now.

I was walking behind Mikuni Akiko.

Keeping a certain distance, not too short, not too far.

I forgot to breathe for a while.

I forgot to blink too.

I calmly…kept a regular pace.

I mustn't catch up.

I mustn't overtake.

Who?

What?

Mikuni Akiko turned the corner. The density of residencies was getting higher. She was still conserving her leisurely pace. She had her chances against the tortoise from *The Tortoise and the Hare*. Where in the world was she headed to? An acquaintance's home?

My prediction was (probably) right. Mikuni Akiko entered a house with 'Sugai' written on the frontplate. It was an impressive manor. As though someone had relocated the Louvre Museum into a normal residential area. The houses next to it—which individually cost enough to buy five houses on the scale of my parents'—looked like dog houses in comparison. As you'd expect from a lady, she was acquainted with a lot of rich people, huh.

Mikuni Akiko returned after a few minutes. She took out her phone and started walking back on the same path she'd come from. I reduced the distance to her.

"Ah…Ooki-san? Yes, the ceremony ended."

To describe her voice I was hearing for the first time like in a shoujo manga…it has a candy-like ring to it. And for a more concrete comparison…though this dates back to over ten years ago…I was fiddling with a radio, browsing random frequencies, when I landed on someone reading Anzai Mariko's lines from *Parasite Eve* as part of a program; it was just like

hers. ...Too obscure, huh. Anyway, it matched well with her stature. It was splendid. Ryouko would tear up if she heard her.

"Yes. Yes, in front of the funeral home. Fifteen minutes? You don't need to hurry that much, I can wait. Pardon? No. Ah...but don't use the Rolls-Royce, it's embarrassing."

The Rolls-Royce...crap, Mikuni Akiko was asking her butler to come pick her up. This was really bad. Butlers were generally uptight, so they would never so much as dream of being late. Rather, they had a tendency of arriving early to wait for their master.

Should I make a move?

The area was deserted.

But it was noon.

We were roughly 200 meters away from my car.

Hey, no...I shouldn't. There were too many risk factors. Plus, an impromptu plan was more likely to fail.

But it was also a miraculous occasion. If I let it slip, who knows when the next one would show up. I remembered my mom telling me long ago that not doing something when the occasion presents itself invites regrets.

I took out my stun gun.

I resigned, as though conceding a candy to a child.

However, staying serious.

Surroundings check. We were in an isolated world as far as I could see. Frontward check. Calculating the distance. Mikuni Akiko put her phone away.

I drew close to her,

Stuck the stun gun to her back,

And turned it on.

She raised a brief scream (unfortunately, it resonated well), collapsed her knees to the ground due to the shock, then feebly turned around to me. Fuck...I'd failed to render her unconscious.

"Ah. Ah..."

A hoarse voice. Her cute voice from earlier was ineffective in this life-threatening situation.

I pressed the stun gun against her mercilessly. The third time's the charm. Mikuni Akiko's body went flacid and she closed her eyes. I hurriedly carried her on my back, then looked around us once again. Alright, there was no…ah.

A kid was standing behind me. He was probably in the lower grades of elementary school. He had a healthy skin tone and wore a striped shirt and short pants.

I was seen.

I was seen.

I was fucking seen.

How unlucky…no, of fucking course there'll be witnesses if you swing around a stun gun in broad daylight in a residential area, you absolute cretin. Geez, that's why I should've given up. Sure, such occasions were rare, but there was no need to do it here. I was regretting everything.

Oh, right, I could just murder this boy… I suddenly got that idea. A sheer thought. A simple solution.

I put Mikuni Akiko down to the ground and greeted the boy. Surprisingly, he didn't run away.

"Hi there," I greeted him. "Fine day, isn't it?"

"Hi," he greeted me back. He even bowed. What a polite kid. Rare these days. "Um…"

"What is it?"

"What happened to that lady?"

The boy tilted his head.

"Ah, yes, she fell down all of a sudden. That really surprised me."

"Will she be all right? She's not moving…"

"Is there a hospital nearby?"

"And I heard a scream earl—"

"Is there a hospital nearby?" I repeated.

“Errrr, there is,” the boy pointed his short index towards the city. “There is a pachinko parlor over there.”

“...Is that Pachinko Giant by any chance?” I mentioned the name of the parlor I passed by car on the way there, and the boy confirmed.

“There is one called Morioka Clinic behind that.”

“Huh. And that’s not a dentist clinic, though, is it?”

I joked around. Apparently I had calmed down a bit.

“No,” the boy shook his head with a straight face, “it’s an urologist clinic.”

4

She never thought she would be attending two funerals in the same month.

She cried when she saw Touko’s portrait. However, Asumi was well aware that her hand holding her handkerchief wasn’t only shaking from grief.

Still...corpses are generally smiling (that was the case for Sana’s too). But that’s just a deception for those alive and sarcasm for the dead. Touko was killed by him. How in hell would she be smiling? The notion of smiling had ceased to exist for her. However, Asumi remembered that the victims of Jack the Stabber usually died with a smile on their faces.

...Is Touko smiling too?

She wanted to witness her expression inside the coffin—her true face—but that was unmistakably a sacrilege to the dead (though corpses are merely objects), and Asumi wouldn’t get to see her body directly to begin with as she wasn’t related to Touko. That being said, she also hated the idea of seeing Touko smiling again.

Asumi feared she wouldn’t survive the situation.

Her train of thought didn’t stop once despite the hardly-formal sutra reading (purely from a subjective standpoint) and the flimsy sobbing around her (that evaluation shouldn’t differ much even through objective lenses).

When it came time to burn incense, her tears wouldn't stop flowing, as though someone had wrapped a foul-smelling band around her eyes. She cried so much she feared her handkerchief wouldn't suffice to dry them all.

Eventually, her turn came. Asumi focused her gaze to a single point at her feet. She wouldn't bear looking straight at the portrait in the middle of the altar.

The monk finished reading his sutras roughly when the attendees were all done burning incense. The temple block kept echoing inside her head.

The coffin will now be carried out. We would like for all the attendees to see Miss Kobayashi Touko off, so please gather by the front door. Can the family of the deceased come to the altar... The organizer announced smoothly. Touko's body was then carried outside and, after a formal speech by her father, put inside a hearse headed for the crematorium. The flashes from the camera didn't stop for a single second while that was happening. Asumi didn't feel especially angry. This was their job, a random episode in their daily lives. Getting offended by that would be pure stupidity. It should be known to all that everyone unconsciously hurts everyone around them as they heal back ad infinitum.

The expression on Touko's brother from when the coffin was carried outside was burned into Asumi's memory. His eyes were not glittering, but brimming with strangely-bright determination.

Just like Kimihiko's eyes had been lately.

Once the main focus of the funeral left, the attendees left the funeral home. Some were lamenting, others were complaining...

What's that cameraman's problem?

I feel bad for Touko-chan...

That's why the media are the worst.

Who gives a crap about Jack the Stabber.

Ah...what should I do for lunch?

She sensed someone near the hall and turned around to find a girl, probably in middle school, looking up at the sky. Her big, cute eyes were red and swollen.

Asumi checked her watch. She had some time until her bus arrived, so she set on eating out. She walked for about ten minutes and arrived at a department store. She roamed through it to find a restaurant. It was noon on a weekday, but the store was pretty crowded nevertheless.

She found one relatively less crowded, though she didn't like that it was next to an arcade. It had a stupid name: Noririn. Still, there should be no correlation between the shop's name and how good the food tastes. Asumi entered the shop. The interior was mainly white and aimed for a cozy atmosphere, but it was so dim it didn't matter how white the walls and tables were. Asumi ordered carbonara and orange juice from a waitress. Probably not the best assortment.

She then spent all her brain power thinking of ways to meet *him* again.

She had met him just once in the past.

On the eleventh of March 2002, a night she couldn't forget (since then, the eleventh had always been her unlucky day).

It was when she witnessed Iida Mayumi (the 37th victim)'s murder through his eyes.

...I have been here.

She recognized the murder scene. Bare-concrete floor. A dark room. Damp air. The usual scenery. Her memories might be conflicting with what she was seeing. That was highly likely. But it still felt familiar.

Then she remembered.

...It's that building.

Isn't it that moonlight-flit building in the town's outskirts? The one I used to go to play as a kid since it was abandoned after the proprietor ran away.

It's close.

A few minutes away on my bike.

The next thing she knew, she was headed for the moonlight-flit building on her bike.

She abandoned the bike once she arrived and proceeded inside.

Weirdly enough, she didn't feel scared or anxious.

She opened every single door she found on her way.

No this one. Not this either. Not here, not here...

Where is he? Come out and show yourself.

He was standing in a room on the third floor.

With a girl's corpse next to him.

For the first time, the scent of blood tickled Asumi's nasal cavity.

She felt like vomiting.

Her head hurt.

He then turned her way.

The room was dark...she couldn't make out his face.

It was a clump of darkness.

He drew closer.

One step. Two steps. Three steps.

She had no memories past the fourth step.

The next time she woke up, she was convulsing before her house's front door.

She wasn't crying; her eyes were wide open and her body trembling.

'Nice to meet you.'

What had he seen? What had he done to her? She couldn't remember at all. She should have managed to escape...probably...

'Nice to meet you.'

She finished eating and left the restaurant, but she still had some time before her bus. She decided to explore the department store as part of her post-meal exercise. She went up to the second floor using the escalator. That floor had a clothes store, a bookstore, and a CD shop—none of them formed a coherent aesthetic. She walked into the CD shop for no particular reason, took out a jacket from that week's top 10 corner, and headed for the register.

If this is what it takes to bury me into a routine, my life is as good as over—she felt the ivy of death entwining itself up to her knees.[17]

Right when she left the shop with the CD she had bought,

"My, is that you, Asumi-chan?"

She heard her name being called from the neighboring bookstore.

It was Kagami Ryouko, carrying a big paper bag near her chest, and wearing jeans—a rare choice for her.

"Ah, Ryouko-san..."

Asumi hung her head. She repressed her urge to run away.

"Long time to see. It feels as nostalgic as *Time Bokan*."

"Ah, yeah..."

"Hasn't it been five years since the last time?"

"No, we met at Sana-chan's funeral..."

"Oops, what a blunder. More importantly, how are you doing? What drew you to Kitahiroshima?"

"Ah, well, something came up, so..."

She mumbled. She had always been bad at talking with her. She couldn't clearly tell why, but that's how it was. She might have been avoiding her instinctively.

"A funeral, right?"

"Eh?"

"I mean, you're wearing a black suit."

"And what are you here for, Ryouko-san?"

"You see, my workplace is pretty close to here."

"Your work was...drawing manga, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. A full-on doujin artist. I just finished my Sakura book yesterday. Starting tomorrow I'll be working on a full-cast one with Multi![18] Ah...or

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[17] Lyrics from the song "Flicker" by the band Supercar, sung by Nakamura Koji.
[18] HMX-12 Multi, a maid robot from the visual novel *To Heart*.

Misuzu maybe.[19] What should I do…" she said, looking genuinely indecisive. "Which do you prefer, Asumi-chan?"

"Um, I have no idea what these are so I'll be—"

"Asumi-chan, are you going along well with Kimihiko?" Ryouko suddenly asked.

"Eh? Well…more or less."

"That moron broke in a weird way after Sana's death, you see," Ryouko's eyes turned into those of one full of contempt for weak people. As they often did. "He's putting me in a bind, really. Have you met that moron recently?"

"Yes, just once."

"He was broken, wasn't he?"

Ryouko gripped her paper bag.

"Ah, errrr…"

He certainly didn't seem in his normal state, but she had scruples nodding to that in front of his family.

"Apparently he's not even showing up to uni either. Good grief."

"Um," Asumi asked out of concern. "Will Kimihiko be okay? Won't it turn out like when Yuna-san—"

"Beats me. Well, it *is* really bad, though."

"Eh?"

"No~thing~. Anyway, Asumi-chan, no need to talk about that idiot for eternity. There's nothing to gain from it. Though I'm the one who brought up the topic."

"Sure…"

"So, are you done with what you had to do?"

"Ah, yes," Asumi acquiesced. "Now only to go home."

"Then let's head back together."

"Eh?" Unfortunately, she had no reason to refuse. "Ah, sure."

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[19] Kamio Misuzu, the main heroine from the visual novel *Air*.

They left the department store together and headed for the parking lot. They didn't talk. Asumi had no idea what she could talk about. She didn't have a good grasp on all the facets that constitute Kagami Ryouko as a person. Although she didn't seem that complex, she was careful not to let people peek at all her cards so easily.

Right...she is surely a simple person. A straightforward person.

Then why was Asumi finding it so tough interacting with her? Why was she avoiding her? She didn't know herself. Why was Kagami Ryouko like that to her? Why was her brain recognizing Ryouko as a source of fear?

"Waaaah!" Ryouko suddenly screamed, cutting Asumi's train of thought short. "That's Kimihiko."

"Eh? Where?"

"Look, over there," she pointed at the parking lot of the department store they'd just left.

Kimihiko was indeed there. In his cherished used car.

"What is he doing? Buying groceries?"

He was stuffing the huge amount of food he'd bought onto the back seats. *He could just put that in the trunk*, Asumi thought.

"Oh, shall we have him drive us home? It might be raining soon, too."

Ryouko twisted her lips in a perverse way.

"Eh, but what about your car?"

"I got a flat tire. A mouse entered one of the front ones. Now, let's go. Use anything at your disposal, even your little brother, they say." She then ran towards Kimihiko, still carrying her paper bag. "Hey, Kimihiko, wait for us!"

Asumi resigned and followed after her. Kimihiko was looking at Ryouko, who had reached him first, with a dubious expression, but his puzzlement escalated when he spotted Asumi, making him knit his eyebrows.

"Wow, that's a rare duo."

5

After deceiving the kid, I ran as fast as I could to my car which I'd parked on the street, Mikuni Akiko on my back. Luckily, no humans or cars appeared. Lucky, super lucky. If life has downs, it also has ups. I opened the trunk, taking no breaks despite having run out of breath, and put Mikuni Akiko inside. Her small body easily fit inside. She was like a doll. I smashed the gas pedal and scampered off. I then swore to myself to never take on such high risks again.

Coming up with a plan and moving according to them was more my style. Impromptu moves like this one consumed too much luck and mental fortitude to be viable. My mush brain froze at the slightest sign of an anomaly. I was in dire need of a quick OS upgrade. I also wanted more memory.

...Well, whatever.

All in all, things were going well. I'd already captured two. At this pace it would be a matter of time before Ketouin Yuika fell into my grasp.

My grasp.

Ketouin Yuika...

I would make her mine?

Monopolize her.

Possess her.

Aaah...moron. What are you thinking? What's up with that greed?

When the fuck had I become a scum liable to do the same things as those who'd tormented my little sister?

I forcibly put a stop to this parade of evil. And yet, since my brain's stop button was broken, it kept expanding low-level delusions. I hate myself, I hate myself.

On the way I stopped by the department store I'd bought my suit from and stocked up on a crap ton of food for those two. Then, when I was done struggling to stuff my car's back seats with the grocery bags containing the food and sanitary products, my name got called out by a familiar voice.

Behind me, Ryouko was carrying an ochre paper bag to her chest.

"Nee-san?"

“Yop yop!”

She laughed, cheerfully.

“What a coincidence.”

I told her, annoyed.

“Shouldn’t you say it’s predestined harmony, rather?”

Right then, a familiar face appeared behind her back.

Her black suit threw me a bit off, but I immediately noticed it was Asumi. She was looking awkward. Geez! I was the one in an awkward position!

“Wow, that’s a rare duo.”

I said so for the time being, not expecting it would somehow save the day for me.

“Say, Kimihiko, what are you doing here? Attending a funeral too?”

“…What are you saying?” It was probably a joke, but it took me by surprise nevertheless. “I’m just buying groceries.”

“In Kitahiroshima?”

Shut up.

“What does it matter to you where people buy their groceries?”

“What did you buy? Show me,” Ryouko took a peek inside the car. “Mm?”

“Hey, stop that.”

I pushed her back by reflex. Shoot, against someone as perceptive as her, I’d just signed my death warrant. No, even someone as perceptive as a camel would get suspicious with such an exaggerated reaction.

“Dummy! I’m carrying a bag! I will have you pay for the damages if you make me drop it! And beware, this teddy plush sewing kit isn’t all that cheap!” She corrected her posture and screamed at me. “It’s pretty pricey.”

“Teddy?”

“It’s for Li-kun. May my love reach him! RELEASE![20]”

She yelled and jumped.

“Stop screaming. Anyway, back off…”

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[20] Li Xiaolang from *Cardcaptor Sakura*. The ‘release’ is the keyword ending Sakura’s incantations.

She couldn't sit still, huh. Screaming this loudly might wake up Mikuni Akiko inside the trunk.

"Why are you angry?"

She interrupted her jump and took a step back from the car. Go further.

"Beats me. I wonder why," I sighed on purpose. I then looked at Asumi, still looking as awkward as earlier.

"Hey, Asumi."

"Eh, what?"

She raised her face.

"You'd better run. You'll get infected with Nee-san's disease."

"Whew, lewd," Ryouko said.

"How?"

"Lewd!"

I told you to stop screaming.

"Well…err…" Anyway, I had to change the topic of conversation. Ryouko was like a cat; show her some food and she'll jump at it. "Nee-san, what about work?"

"I'm done for the day~!" She put up a big smile. "Sakura-chan, done! In the end I opted for a Kero-chan x Sakura-chan. The contents are full-on hardcore. But starting tomorrow I'll be living the Multi life. I'll draw to my heart's content. It makes me so happy I feel like crying. As much as Okuyasu when he drank Tonio's water.[21]"

"Isn't Multi that girl with sensors as ears?"

I said in a hurry. She was a character from a PC game that came out over a decade ago, the culmination of otakus' desires on full display. And she was a robot. Like, geez, come on.

"Kyaah!" She reacted as I wanted her to. "How do you know that?" She was so ecstatic she might fly off any second. And in fact, she did jump about

[21] An episode from *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure: Diamond is Unbreakable*.

eight centimeters off the ground. “Then do you know about Serio? And Okada?[22]”

“I just know someone who’s into that. He was looking forward to Nii-san’s company taking off. He said he’d buy one from him for up to 200 million yen.”

By the way, the Kagami family’s eldest son was working in (humanoid) robotics. You can’t get more shady than that.

“Oh, you’re right… Can’t he hurry up and make a Multi? A Chii would be just as great, though.[23]”

“They won’t make it in our lifetime.”

According to the eldest, it was insanely difficult to manufacture robots with a level of consciousness on the same level as humans with similar bodily responses.

“That’s where you’re wrong, I’m sure they will. For certain,” she nodded to herself, confidently. “More like, I’m pretty sure they can already make simple ones. Try to remember…it was an eternity ago, but Nii-san brought home a weird robot, didn’t he? I bet they’ve completed a more performant version of that one by now. I mean, people go through hardships so they can take it easy, so of course we’ll eventually mass produce maid robots. Kyaah!”

“Is that so… Anyway, I have to go now.”

Finding an opening, I went around to the driver side.

“Oh, I’d forgotten,” Ryouko drew closer to the car. “Hey, Kimihiko.”

“Yeah?” Tsk, so it wasn’t enough. “What is it?”

“Hey hey, can you drive us both home?”

Don’t joke around! I had an all-important mission: Delivering Mikuni Akiko to the ghost hospital before she woke up inside my trunk.

“What happened to your car?”

“A tire got punctured.”

“Can’t you take the bus home?”

---

[22] HMX-13 Serio and Megumi Okada, two other characters from *To Heart*.
[23] Chii, a robot and the main character from the manga *Chobits*.

“We don’t have the money.”

“Then walk.”

“You’re so cold, like a frosted cake.”

“No, frosted cakes don’t *have* to be cold.”

“Why won’t you let us in your car?”

Her eyes when she asked that were those of a great detective about to shine light onto a crime.

“I’m in a hurry here.”

I intentionally answered in a curt tone.

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying.”

It really wasn’t a lie. I wasn’t playing on the same field as pizza delivery guys.

“Hmm. Don’t tell me…” her detective eyes got sharper, “you’re already in a big mess?”

“Huh?”

Fuck, what’s everyone’s deal, why were they all talking in suggestive ways? Insinuations of the sort are the main causes for ruining unity and stability. My anger gauge and panic gauge were both growing steadily.

“Now, now, drive us home, please.” Ryouko had sat in the passenger seat while I was angry and panicking. A mistake on my part, I’d forgotten to lock the car.

“Don’t be shy, Asumi-chan, come in. Ride On Supercar From Here, yo.”

“Eh, ah, but…”

Asumi’s awkward expression peaked in awkwardness. Of course it would. She could see I clearly wasn’t keen on letting her aboard.

“It’s okay, don’t worry. Get in, and you win.”

Ryouko cared not for people’s emotions.

Tch, no good, I gave up. I couldn’t win against my sister. I was weak and couldn’t do much more than pray to God so there wouldn’t be any problems. I got in the driver seat, resolved to see it through.

Asumi glanced at Ryouko, thought for a bit, then got in the back of the car. I could see her struggling to make space for herself in the mirror.

“Kimihiko-kun, it’s cramped here.”

Asumi complained. Of course it was. Two thirds of the space in the back was occupied by grocery bags.

“Please suck it up.”

“Just stuff it inside the trunk,” Ryouko made the worst suggestion possible from the passenger seat. “They called it a trunk because you store things there. Maybe, I don’t know.”

“The trunk is no good.”

I hurried to answer. I had to keep them away from it, even if it cost my life.

“Why?”

“It’s broken and won’t open.”

The easiest lies to bust are the ones thought up on the spot.

“Oh my, that must be troubling,” Ryouko put up a hand before her mouth and smiled. “Shall I fix it for you?”

“Fix it?”

I had a bad feeling.

“Yes, leave it to me.”

“Ah—no,” I panicked. “Don’t bother.” My suspicion level was at 500%.

“No need to hold back.”

Ryouko made to get out of the car.

Crap.

I couldn’t let her.

Fuck.

Ahhhh…

Aaah!

Don’t you ruin it.

This story belonged to Sana and me.

I couldn’t have her barge in on it.

A nauseating feeling shuddered inside my chest.

I would use brute force.

“...Nee-san. I don’t know what you know or what you prophesied,” I grabbed her arm with enough strength to crush it, “but could you stop what you’re doing? This is *my* life.”

“You think shattering other people’s lives for your own is justified?”

That was hypocritical from her. But who knew, she might have her reasons.

“What do you want to get at...”

I carefully asked.

She was staring straight into my eyes, but then stuck out her tongue and smiled. I didn’t get it. Nothing forced her to act like that in this situation.

“Heh heh, Kimihiko, it’s your win. Bravo! As a reward I won’t do anything else.”

She resigned with ease and faced ahead with ease.

...Was she letting me off the hook?

“Will you...” I muttered. “Then we’re getting somewhere.” Right, the world could stay at peace as long as they didn’t look inside the trunk.

I looked at Asumi in the mirror; she was looking at the grocery bags she was sharing her seat with.

6

It started drizzling. After dropping Ryouko and Asumi off, I headed for the hospital at such high speed I wondered if I hadn’t secretly been born to a cheetah and a Porsche. The pour got stronger. The sound of the rain hitting glass and the wipers driving it away echoed inside my ears.

When I reached the hospital, I took out a flashlight and Mikuni Akiko from the trunk. Mikuni Akiko on my back, I proceeded inside the building.

I unlocked the padlock and opened the door to room 206.

It was dark inside.

“You’ve come again...”

Toudou Yumie welcomed me with her anxious voice.

“Oh, you’ve eaten it all already?” Wiping the rainwater off my face, I pointed the flashlight at a pile of garbage on the floor. Most of it was overflowing from the bag. “I’d bought you so much, though.”

“None of that crap fills you up. Bread is the worst. It leaves me hungry.”

“Then what do you want?”

“A lunchbox.”

“That’s money I don’t have, I couldn’t get you a meal a day then,” I answered honestly. “Students live on an allowance. We’re poor.”

“Then let me go home. You’re making me develop a phobia of the dark,” Toudou Yumie complained. “I’m seriously sick of the dark. It makes me want to die at night. Plus it’s super hot and I’m sweat—”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I put down Mikuni Akiko on a bed and took out a candle and a pair of handcuffs from a locker. I lit the candle up. I could see the exhaustion and suffering from being handcuffed to an iron bar on Toudou Yumie’s face. Her visage was glistening too.

“Ah…” She noticed Mikuni Akiko lying on the bed and hurriedly stood up from her chair. “Hey, isn’t that girl Akiko-chan?”

“Sit down.”

“You even went after Akiko-chan…”

“I told you to sit down.”

Hearing my harsh tone, Toudou Yumie reverted to a seated position, glaring at me.

“So that girl really is Mikuni Akiko, right?”

“Yeah. I’m impressed you know her.”

“We’ve been friends since we were little…”

Toudou Yumie’s and Mikuni Akiko’s parents were acquaintained. It wasn’t unexpected. I gave her a half-hearted reaction and placed another folding chair under the window sealed with planks.

“Tell me.”

“…What?”

“Are you going to detain Akiko-chan as well?”

“Obviously,” what a stupid question, especially at this point. “After all, her dad raped my little sister too.”

“You’re insane.”

“Yeah…probably.” I might’ve been answering honestly. “I seriously believe I am.”

“If you’re aware of it you should hurry up and drop dead.”

Her tone was hostile. It felt like she would jump at me at any moment if she could.

“Stop it. You don’t have to act like that, you know?”

“Shut up! Get away from Akiko-chan!”

“Listen…” we weren’t getting anywhere. I looked up at the cracked ceiling. “You certainly have the right to express your opinion to me. But you see, I have no reason whatsoever to listen to you.”

“You’re really insane.”

Toudou Yumie faintly shook her head to communicate she was giving up on making sense of my thought process. Really? Do whatever.

I made Mikuni Akiko sit on the folding chair, then connected her left wrist to one of the window’s iron bars with handcuffs. She was still unconscious so her head drooped to the side.

“You’ll have less space but don’t resent me too much for it.”

I spoke to Toudou Yumie, sitting next to me.

“You’re really insane.”

She was getting on my nerves repeating that.

“Please, could you stop acting like I’m the only bad guy? I might be doing something bad, sure, but to begin with that’s because your—”

“You’re just shifting the blame,” Toudou Yumie argued.

“That’s sophism.”

“From who?”

“Beats me.”

“I really can’t hold a conversation with you.”

Toudou Yumie was looking over the sleeping Mikuni Akiko.

“Then don’t bother speaking…” I took out Mikuni Akiko’s phone from her breast pocket and slammed it onto the floor. Modern phones had become so light it broke easily. “Don’t you ever think about how easy life would be if you could destroy everything like this?”

“I sure want to destroy you from the bottom of my heart.”

“I’ve been broken since way back.”

To my answer, Toudou Yumie smiled, approvingly.

“You’re really rude.”

“Tell me.”

“Mm?”

I reverted my gaze to Toudou Yumie.

“Who are you going to abduct next?”

“Ketouin’s granddaughter, Yuika. That’s the last of them. Know her?”

“I don’t,” she answered, minding the handcuffs around her wrist. “But she’s innocent too, isn’t she? The poor girl.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Say, is there any meaning to your revenge?”

“What?” I asked back. “There’s no…I haven’t thought about it.”

“Are you joking!?”

She screamed in a defiant tone.

“Joking about what?”

“You’re abducting us without any meaning to it? Answer me!”

“Don’t scream.”

I warned her.

“Why did you kidnap me? Can you finally cough up your reason now?”

“I told you, it’s because your father raped—”

“But that’s not a reason,” she whipped back. “At least not a sufficient one for you to kidnap me.” She asserted. “Aren’t I right? You should have abducted my dad, in normal circumstances.”

“No, but that’s…”

What happened? Why was I wincing?

“And yet you went after me. …At first, I thought your goal was to rape me and make me go through the same thing as your little sister for revenge. But that’s not your intention, is it?”

“Of course not!”

There would be no value in doing that.

“Aren’t you the one screaming now? Come on, answer me,” Toudou Yumie didn’t stop insisting. “Why did you kidnap me? What necessity was there in your target being me?”

I told you,

There’s no meaning…

7

Why would Kimihiko need to buy sanitary products? She wondered that since she saw the contents of his grocery bags.

Did he make himself a girlfriend…

However, would a girl really have her boyfriend buy her sanitary products? (At the very least, Asumi would never.) And even if she did, Asumi couldn’t imagine Kimihiko obediently buying those without throwing a fit.

Then had he been asked to by the women in the Kagami family? But Sana was no longer alive, and Ryouko had her uterus taken out at the age of fourteen due to cancer… Could it be Naomi?

…Whatever.

At the moment Asumi didn’t have enough mental leeway to keep pondering about sanitary products. Her mind was full with him—Jack the Stabber.

Emotions are made to be concealed, Asumi coldly said to herself in the corner of her head.

Chapter 4

I Tried Getting It Wrong

1

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." Mikuni Akiko was crying. "I'm so sorry, y-your little sister was...by my dad..." She, too, had apparently noticed her dad was doing some bad stuff in secret. "I'm sorry. I'm really, sincerely..."

"Hey jerk, don't you feel bad for making an innocent girl apologize to you like that?" While Mikuni Akiko was incessantly crying, Toudou Yumie glared at me with her eyes now adorned with bags. Today was the third of September. I'd captured her on the 17th of last month, so it was her 18th day of detainment, huh. Good on her for holding strong. "You're the worst. Pure scum."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Mikuni Akiko was wiping her tears with her right hand, the only one she could freely use. Her cute voice was growing hoarse. Her shoulders were shaking, likely because she was crying, and so were her knees, but likely because she was scared.

"Now, how about you say something instead of keeping silent, Mister Pervert. I'm waiting for your witty rebuttal."

"Oh please." Seated on the edge of a broken bed, I repressed my anger by force. As proof I was forcing myself, cold sweat was running down my face. "You're acting like I'm the bad guy again."

"Because you are. Am I wrong?" Toudou Yumie answered while combing her hair that had lost all luster. "You're evil down to the bone. Can't argue against that, can you? Right?"

"How the hell am I evil? Come on, name one reason."

I was getting desperate. I'd take it all to the face.

"You're detaining people, this is a crime. Or do you disagree? Eh? Is this a normal thing to do in your mind? Ew, that's—"

"Shut your trap, seriously."

"Switching to threats when your position gets worse when you're the one who asked?" Her voice then was more nasal. "Such scum."

Fuck!

I slammed my fist into room 206's walls. It didn't budge. Instead, an intense pain coursed through my first. Even so, my emotions were still escalating.

"I'm sorry..." Mikuni Akiko muttered after breathing dusty air in.

"Akiko-chan, you have nothing to apologize for to this jerk."

Toudou Yumie spoke to Mikuni Akiko, who was hanging head like a samurai who'd failed to commit seppuku.

"But...our fathers did...to his little sister..."

"They raped her."

I said.

"So...therefore," she was covering her face, so her cute voice came out as mumbles. "It's still a bad thing."

"But that's no reason for *you* to apologize or for us to be detained, is it?" Rather than wanting to enlighten her, Toudou Yumie's tone was that of someone desperately seeking for an ally, no matter what it may cost her. "This psychotic scum is at fault here." She then glared at me, gathering all negative emotions she could muster into her gaze. "He's the one at fault for everything."

"The source of evil is your daddies. You can't refute that. ...Oh, right. I'll show you a video next time. I'll have the sight of your dear dads raping young girls burnt into your retinas! How about it?!"

My high-pitched scream made Mikuni Akiko melt into tears once again. Geez...what was her problem, didn't she know that the only problem tears ever solved was dirty diapers?

"Hey, that's too far."

Toudou Yumie stood up. What, was she picking a fight?

"What is?"

"I will tell you, since you're so oblivious. ...You're becoming a deviant."

“Heh, more so than your dads?”

“Yes. You’re far worse than them.”

“I’m not a deviant. I can assert that with confidence.”

“So what you’re doing now is upright?”

“Well…you know, it’s certainly not upright, but still…”

That was a sore spot. A half-assed awareness can’t get you through everything.

“See, you’re admitting it.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re more of an earsore than I am. And I’m completely honest here.”

“Then I’ll do you the favor of shutting up.”

“Really? I’ll use this occasion to say my piece, then.”

Toudou Yumie scoffed.

“Do whatever. No matter what you may say, it won’t alter the fact that your dads raped my little sister.”

“And I’m telling you that way of thinking shows you’re a deviant. …People like you should just die!”

Her emotions perhaps reaching their boiling point, Toudou Yumie raised a louder scream than usual.

“Sorry, but I can’t afford to die yet,” I answered honestly. “If someone is to die, why don’t you go ahead. I’ll even help you with that.”

“As if you had the guts to.”

I moved my hand to take out the stun gun from my pocket.

“Stop it! Both of you…” Mikuni Akiko screamed without raising her face. Her small body was shaking wildly. “Please, I beg you, don’t…don’t…”

“Akiko-chan…”

“U-um…” Mikuni Akiko timidly raised her face. My face warped in the reflection of her reddened eyes. “W-will you stop after killing us?”

“What?”

I asked back by reflex.

“Well, um, so, would killing us satisfy you?”

Mikuni Akiko's lips were pale blue. She was scared of me from the bottom of her heart.

"Akiko-chan, stop it. You'll go mad if you try to converse with this guy."

"*You* shut up. You're lacking in gray cells," I replied, gritting my teeth. I then reverted my gaze to Mikuni Akiko. "You know…that's not the point. Killing you or doing anything else won't make me feel any better. That's why…I don't wish for that in the slightest. Honestly."

Yes, these were my pure and honest thoughts. That kind of physical revenge is futile—sheer nonsense.

"Then…what do you wish for?"

Her voice was stiff, but thanks to her good upbringing she still maintained a courteous tone. Worlds apart from Toudou Yumie.

"Nothing really."

I couldn't come up with another answer.

"…What will you do with us?"

She sniffled. I'd bring her tissues the next time I came by.

"Err, what do you mean?"

"Um, I'm just wondering, if you are not going to kill us, then what are you going to do…"

I could see traces of fear in the corners of her mouth.

"I won't do anything."

"It's all lies!"

Toudou Yumie slapped the cracked wall with her palm.

"All?" She struck a nerve. "What do you mean 'all,' hey. That's too far, don't you think?"

"But you kicked me, didn't you?"

"Ki-kicked?"

Mikuni Akiko asked with a shocked expression.

"Yes, this idiot kicked my stomach with all his strength." Toudou Yumie stroked her stomach. "He must love violence, I bet."

"He kicked you…"

“Come on, don’t look at me with these eyes. Please,” I said to Mikuni Akiko, who was on the verge of tears. “You see, I was *forced* to resort to violence because she was too noisy. I’m not gonna kick anybody if they act normal.”

“You’re lying again.”

“Shut up.”

Toudou Yumie reluctantly backed down when I showed her a glance of my stun gun. She seemed to really hate the idea of getting that shock a second time.

“Trust me, I’m not lying. I won’t kill or kick you. I swear.

I faced Mikuni Akiko anew.

“You won’t do…anything?”

“No, I won’t.”

“If you won’t do anything…then why exactly did you kidnap us?”

“I’ll go buy you some food. Anything in particular you want to eat?”

2

‘I want someone to save me.’ Thinking that is proof one is a weakling. I’d thought that throughout the 18 years I’d been alive for.

“Yo, congrats. Looks like you’ve caught Mikuni Akiko,” the moment I left the hospital, my brother gave me a call to congratulate me. “You’re now a full-fledged criminal. Keep in mind to be careful around the police.”

“Will you finally explain how you’re doing this? How do you know what I’m doing? Where are you…watching me from?”

I obviously hadn’t informed him about Mikuni Akiko.

“I don’t have an omniscient perspective,” I couldn’t tell if his abashed voice coming out of the phone meant he was joking or being serious. “My eyes are where they ought to be. Same for my mouth, and of course for my brain too.”

“So you’re not willing to answer me…okay.”

“Well, you’d panic if I told you. Same logic as with aliens.”

“Hey, Nii-san… Do you think I’m mistaken?”

I looked up at the sky. It was cloudless, as though the rain from the other day was a dream. A warm breeze caressed me.

“Going gloomy mode from the start?” Nii-san seemed fed up. “You sound like you want to die. Heh…must feel good to be that carefree. Do you want to commit suicide?”

“Never! I’m not Yuna-nee-san. I would never commit suicide.”

“So you still have enough strength to scream…” Nii-san snorted. “And here I thought you were having real struggles.”

“I won’t die,” I asserted while heading back to my car which I’d parked deeper into the forest.

“Right, you will not die. But what you’re doing right now is basically suicide. Though I think you’re aware of it.”

“What am I doing, exactly? Please explain, Nii-san.”

“Are you so stupid I must explain everything?”

“Why am I being blamed so much?”

“…Blamed? Kimihiko, you were being blamed? What a masterpiece.”

“Listen, Nii-san, I’m not joking here,” I said as though I’d just had my psyche unfairly damaged. “I am doing something bad, I admit. I might also be growing deviant, and yeah there’s a high chance that I’m a lunatic. But still, just because of that…I think it’s unreasonable to only blame me.”

I didn’t know why I could share my own weakness and pride with Nii-san so easily. Was that a sign my mind had grown frail and numb? Or…it might indicate I wasn’t fully backed into a corner yet.

“You’re the one being unreasonable in this case,” Nii-san asserted like a psychologist pointing out a core aspect of me. “Someone hurt you, so you hurt them in return. But it’s unfair for them to call what you’re doing unreasonable? That’s what you’re arguing for. Are you a child? Trying to solely obey the principle of ‘an eye for an eye’ is futile.”

“Stop it, that word is—”

“You’re too naive. You’re doing something crazy, you should naturally be aware of the risks that come along with it. It’s like war, high-risk, high-reward… Wait, but did you gain anything?”

“Yeah, I perfectly understand,” I muttered. I had reached my car. “…Sure, I get it, risk…risk.”

“Kimihiko…”

“What?”

“You know that’s not it, right?” He talked like he was seeing through me. “The focal point of your struggles isn’t such a trivial theme.”

“Are you impersonating a psychologist?”

I boarded my car with a laugh.

“Listen seriously. I’m talking in all seriousness here.”

“How rare of you.”

“I’ve said it before, but you’re acting too conceptually.”

“Conceptually?”

“I will ask you one thing. Answer on the spot. Okay? On the spot. When I say on the spot—”

“Hurry up and get it out.”

“Why are you kidnapping the daughters and granddaughters of the people who raped Sana instead of them directly?”

“Tha…”

I couldn’t answer on the spot.

“See? You can’t answer.”

“No, I was just…I was about to answer,” I thought saying this would be detrimental to me, but I had already said it. “So… It’s because…”

“Cough it up.”

“I’m about to!”

“Clearly you’re unable to find the words because you have no intent,” Nii-san proudly claimed…rather, solemnly claimed.

“No, you’re wrong. I do have one.”

I turned the engine on and removed the side brake with my left hand. I gripped the wheel strongly. The sun was bright.

“That’s a delusion. You’re merely persuading yourself that you have an intent.”

“You’re wrong!”

“You act without an intent then do unnecessary things to force a reason onto your actions. Again and again. You’re in a crevice.”

“Acting like you’ve looked inside my mind…”

“Yeah, I did. Not as a metaphor.”

“Wow, good for you!”

I screamed away. Should I just ram into the forest?!

“Anyway. There is not an ounce of meaning, reason, or purpose to what you are doing. You’re merely acting on concepts. It’s in your best interest to realize that.”

“You’re wrong.”

Yeah, he was wrong, of course he was.

“Have you been dreaming about Sana lately?”

Nii-san’s tone changed abruptly.

“Huh? What is it all of a sudden?”

“I’m asking if you’re dreaming about Sana. I am, by the way. After all, Sana had a high scarcity value.”

“Scarcity value?”

“She was the only sane person in our family.”

“The only?” I couldn’t let that pass. “I’m just as sane as her.”

“Says the deviant.”

“…”

“I loved Sana,” Nii-san suddenly said.

“…What’s your deal now?”

“Don’t worry.”

“About what?”

“I don’t mean it quite like that. Your brother being your rival in love? Come on, even shoujo manga don’t do that anymore.”

“Wh-what are you…”

I got scared. He was seeing through me. Eh? What does it mean to see through someone?

“But she really was a fine woman,” Nii-san said maliciously. “She was pretty and, most importantly, clever. You won’t find many women as fine as her around. And she was only four years away from being legal. A shame.”

“Why are you bringing that up?”

I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“You and Sana fucked, didn’t you?”

Nii-san said in his tenacious tone, as though he was a psychologist whose sole purpose in life was to shatter their patients’ psyche.

Hatred. Humiliation. Shyness. Panic.

“I’ll kill you!”

“You can’t.”

3

It happened.

She was in the midst of cooking mixed fried rice for lunch.

Her vision faded away.

The connection started.

The world of white.

Silence.

Stillness.

Followed by the appearance of the world where her and his visions are one and the same.

Where am I? That’s what Asumi always wondered first during a connection.

A room surrounded by concrete. A surprising dimness for noon. She couldn't feel up to the temperature, but the room felt humid.

Moreover…the place looked familiar.

No, not merely familiar.

This was that one moonlight-flit building.

However…he had never committed a murder twice in the same spot. Was he changing his methods *now*? Or did he not have any to begin with?

He was looking at the ceiling. Asumi could only see a fluorescent bulb with no electricity coursing through it and a dull, concrete surface. …He often looked upwards like this right before carrying out his murders. Asumi couldn't guess why. It might be an important ceremony, or he might simply do it because he feels like doing it.

After waiting for a short while, his gaze started descending.

A girl was lying face-up on the floor.

She was the same age as Asumi, maybe a year or two older. She had brown hair and wore a second-hand-looking, three-quarter-sleeve shirt. And, like the others before, she was smiling.

…How can she smile?

Most of the girls killed by him had a bright smile.

While some sullied their faces with tears and mucus, about 80% of the girls Asumi had witnessed passing away did so with a smile.

What were they so happy about? They must have gone crazy to find joy in getting killed. There was no other explanation for her.

He took out the infamous knife from his pants' pocket and raised it high above the girl's face. It was, as always, a mundane knife lacking in any style. A few years ago the police were eager to find out Jack the Stabber's identity through his acquisition method of the knives, but ultimately, being a mundane item available anywhere, they had no success with it. Nowadays the police had put pressure to forbid the sale of similar knives, but he still hadn't run out of them. Had he bought them en masse?

The sharp blade was shining right in front of her, and yet the girl was still smiling. Asumi definitely couldn't comprehend that behavior. The girl lying on the floor briefly whispered to the man without breaking her smile. What could she have said? It was vexing that Asumi’s hearing wasn’t part of the connection.

He nodded a few times, then planted the knife in the girl’s neck.

Blood splattered.

The girl convulsed.

Pew, pew, pew.

Jolt, jolt.

Splat, splosh.

Twitch, jolt.

Asumi observed that scene with a serene mind.

A murder scene.

At first, she was scared. She wanted to puke. She cried.

Real blood.

Real corpses.

Real…deaths.

However,

She had grown used to it.

She had grown used to it.

She had to have grown used to it.

No, not quite.

She only ever had two choices: grow used to it or go mad.

Then growing used to it was the natural choice.

Blood is a liquid.

Corpses are objects.

Once she started thinking like that, it stopped bothering her. All fear and disgust vanished from her heart.

And if she doesn’t feel anything…she cannot react.

His gaze was fixed on the knife he'd stabbed into the girl's neck. What was this sight making him think and feel? Asumi found that very intriguing. Was it some mundane emotion like joy, grief, or anger? Or was it something ludicrous Asumi could never imagine?

The connection got severed.

She returned to her world...

The image of the girl spewing crimson blood out of her neck faded away. She couldn't keep cooking fried rice.

She had to go.

4

I bought food in a nearby supermarket. But I didn't feel like returning to the hospital immediately so I was driving around at random.

Meaning.

Meaning, meaning.

Meaning, meaning, meaning.

Meaning, meaning, meaning, meaning, meaning, meaning, meaning, meaning, meaning, meaning, meaning.

Why were Toudou Yumie, Mikuni Akiko, and Nii-san so obsessed with 'meaning'?

Was there any value...to that obsession?

Or was the presence of meaning inevitable...

No,

Don't get led astray.

I wouldn't let myself be deceived.

Fuck if you think you can fool me.

5

It had been 30 minutes since the murder had occurred. It was unlikely he was still hiding somewhere inside the building. However, even so, Asumi proceeded inside—a faint glimmer of hope spawning in her heart from the fact he had remained inside the moonlight-flit building for a while after Iida Mayumi's murder, which was the trigger for their first encounter.

This time again...she felt no fright.

She obviously didn't want to die. Asumi was so greedy with living she had answered the question, 'If you could have any dream come true, what would you wish for?'—from her elementary school's graduation album—with 'A long life' without putting any real thoughts into it. She was well-aware of it.

I'm sure meeting that man is synonymous with living to me. Asumi tried fabricating low-level lies to keep her mental state in check.

Even the arrogant blue sky and the barbarian sun rays couldn't enter through the building's tiny windows without weakening. A heavy, dense air enveloped Asumi. She turned on the flashlight she'd brought with her. A yellow circle appeared on the wall. Needless to say, that did not help alleviating the atmosphere dominating that room.

Asumi was running aimlessly. *Where is it? Where is the room he killed that girl in?* She opened any door she came across, which reminded her she used to play a similar game here.

However, he was nowhere to be seen. *Where could he...ah.*

In a corner of the third floor.

The room where Iida Mayumi died and I met him.

She wasn't especially confident. No...she didn't need to be. Asumi ran up the dusty stairs.

She reached the door.

After some hesitation, she opened it.

Inside the dim room, there was one person and one corpse.

The corpse of a girl with brown hair, wearing a second-hand-looking, three-quarter-sleeve shirt, and with a knife stabbed through her neck. Dark red blood. The remains of a life. That was an object.

A man was standing next to it, looking down on the corpse.

She couldn't distinguish her face due to the backlight, but he was probably in his late teens or early twenties. Only his Hysteric Glamour shirt eerily stood out in the darkness.

"U-um..."

Her throat was too stressed to emit sounds. That fact informed her she was extremely tense, it seemed.

"Three minutes too late," the man said in a high-pitched voice. "Had you arrived three minutes earlier, you would have been the first to discover Jack the Stabber's 78th victim."

"Um, are you..."

"I am not Jack the Stabber, sorry."

The man drew a step closer.

Asumi took a step back.

"Do you have a phone, perchance?" the man asked.

"Eh?"

"A mobile phone. Do you have one?"

"Ah, I do..." Asumi stuck a hand in her pocket. "...Ah," however, she then realized she'd been in such a hurry she'd left it at home. "I'm sorry, I forgot to take it..." She didn't know why she was apologizing.

"Well, I forgot mine too, unfortunately," the man drew even closer. "Whatever, let's search for a public phone."

"A phone...?"

Her voice was trembling.

"To call the police," he said like it was the most natural thing. "It's a citizen's duty."

"Right."

He has a point.

"You don't seem too shocked by the sight of a corpse, huh."

The man glanced at the girl's corpse. Asumi pointed her flashlight at it and observed it. The blood had coagulated and her skin was now pale.

The very definition of a corpse.

Even when looking directly at it, Asumi still didn't feel disgusted. She was used to it. But she couldn't honestly answer that she was used to seeing corpses, so she tried to dodge the question.

"U-um..."

"Mn? What is it?"

"Why...are you here?"

Asumi asked what had been weighing on her mind. Sweat was forming on her forehead. And it wasn't only because of the heat.

"Well, if you say that...there's only one answer I can give you," the man stood before Asumi's eyes. About 50 centimeters away from her. Even with how dark the room was, she could recognize his face at this distance. His features were surprisingly youthful. "'That's what *I* want to ask.'"

"Eh?"

"How did you know someone had been killed in this building?"

"Oh."

"You entered the building because you knew someone had died inside, didn't you? You can't buy your way out of it by saying you simply happened to be around. There was no hesitation in your steps."

He was shrewd. But answering truthfully likely wouldn't get across, so Asumi stayed quiet.

"Supernatural powers."

The man abruptly said.

"Su—?" She had reacted too obviously. "Ah..."

"I take it you don't wish to answer?"

The man asked and put up a smile as gentle as a sweet lie.

"Ah, that's not it," Asumi was peeved at the idea she was mesmerized by that smile, so she denied in a hurry. "I just thought you wouldn't believe me anyway..."

"Why is that?"

"Um, but what about you? How did you know?"

“I know this is extremely bad taste, but I was following you. I mean, you rushed into Building F all pale. Of course that piqued my curiosity, as a man.”

“Building F?”

“That’s the name of this building. You didn’t know?”

“Oh, I didn’t.”

“Let’s head out for the time being. It’s getting depressing, don’t you think?”

The man suggested.

“Ah, sure.”

“Are you free right now?”

“What?”

She asked back by reflex.

“Let’s eat together. This must be some sort of fate. I’ve taken an interest in you. Not in a weird way, mind you.”

“Huh?”

...What should I do?

It’s obvious. Of course I should run away. It’s common knowledge that one shouldn’t follow strangers.

“Where do you want our date to be?” the man cheerfully locked arms with her. “Let me think, hmm, how about McDonald’s? That’s a staple for first dates,” the man’s tone was bright, however, the next moment, he took a glacial and stiff expression...that was probably his real face. “You will tell me how you came to know about this corpse once we get there. Ah, but let’s hit a public phone first.”

———

Two humans and a corpse inside a room. Jack the Stabber was standing behind the ajar door leading to it.

That was a close one. Had I been a bit slower, there would now be three corpses in there. Not like killing them would be problematic, but it's exhausting. Plus I didn't prepare any spare knives.

They seem quite calm, eh...

Jack the Stabber kept themselves from laughing out loud. Staying as calm as a low-gliding swallow. *Good grief, when did things turn out this way?* That interrogation somewhat intrigued them. However, like the memories of a dinner from two days ago, it had sunk and was tough to salvage.

Well, whatever. All in all, I still manage to live, and I still manage to kill.

I've stayed true to my ideal.

Though...I've faltered quite a bit.

Jack the Stabber left Building F. Just in case, they checked for any blood spurts. Not a single crimson droplet had reached their clothes. They were used to it.

Outside, a refreshing sky and a refreshing heat were refreshingly sprawling out. It had been especially cloudy in the past few days, but all the gloom went away in this early September in favor of liveliness. *Good weather in times like this just makes you feel strangely blessed. To express it subjectively: It makes you feel like a doctor discovering traces of cancer under the cheers of their colleagues...nevermind, I guess it doesn't make sense. Well, at least it's subjective.*

Jack the Stabber observed their surroundings. The crowd roaming through the streets. A serial killer mixing with them. What a joke.

However, Jack the Stabber's core didn't raise the corners of their mouth, and instead kept thinking about why Asumi had showed up there.

6

Hundred-meter dash. Ketouin Yuika was running on the school's sports grounds. No matter how you looked at it, that lady's physical abilities weren't suited for this. In fact, in any races she partook in, never deviating from her

vacant look (I'm not calling it a foolish look. Rather, she seemed expressionless), Ketouin Yuika always finished last.

Looking at that scene unfolding from within my car parked in the lot near the sports grounds, I smiled and sometimes spat out the convenience store-bought burger I was eating. Anyone would chuckle if they saw a rich lady running at the speed of a tricycle under a blue sky.

I sunk the saliva-wrapped pieces of burger down my stomach by drinking some afternoon tea, then resumed observing Ketouin Yuika. It felt as though her gentle and melancholic eyes were constantly looking at a different world. What could she see that we didn't? Joking.

I undeniably felt better when looking at Ketouin Yuika.

It felt like she was healing me.

Healing.

Did that mean I was ill?

That…might be the case.

I took a stab at mocking myself. After all, both Nii-san and Toudou Yumie were treating me like a lunatic. That being said…I didn't actually think my behavior was pathological. Not in the slightest. Only cowards blame their sins onto youth or illnesses. I didn't want to become a coward. That was the last thing I wanted to become.

Ketouin Yuika was running at her usual speed on the sports grounds. Her long hair fluttering. Her white skin lightly gleaming. She gave me an urge to root for her. I fantasized about putting a smile on her inexpressive face. I was such a boring guy.

7

"Heh, so…"

In the end, she had followed him to the McDonald's. Well, he had helped her, this was the least she could do…or so she told herself.

When the police asked Asumi why she had entered Building F, to which she couldn't possible give a honest answer, the man currently stuffing his cheeks with a cheeseburger before her eyes—apparently called Ketouin Hiroyuki—told the police officers, "Well you see, my girlfriend right here suddenly got the urge to bang, and like, why would I say no, so we went searching for a kinda remote building and found that spot, but when we got in the room, bam, a corpse," covering for her in a horrible yet helpful way, so she managed to avoid inviting suspicions. Though it had resulted in some people believing them to be an insufferable couple...

Her eyes met with Ketouin Hiroyuki's, seated across from her. His were cold, yet bizarrely affable. Completely unlike how they were when talking to the officers. He probably had multiple 'selves' inside him. Quite a hassle to deal with.

"So it was really supernatural powers?"

"...Do you believe what I said?"

Asumi was surprised. Had Ketouin Hiroyuki bought that truth which sounded way more fake than a clumsy lie? Aside from Touko, Asumi didn't know anyone who didn't doubt others to that degree. Though Touko was no longer alive.

"After all, I don't have the grounds to prove it's a lie," Hiroyuki answered, then grabbed his milkshake.

"But..."

"Well, I'm also considering the possibility of you being one of Jack the Stabber's acquaintances or Jack the Stabber themselves."

"I'm not any of that," Asumi denied.

"You are not Jack the Stabber nor one of their acquaintances. And yet you knew of a freshly-killed corpse's location. If we are to believe that, it leaves us with two possibilities."

"Two?"

"It was either a coincidence or due to a supernatural phenomenon."

What was he saying? Asumi felt like he was playing around. He could surely come up with much more reasonable possibilities by thinking with the least bit of seriousness…

"Yes. It's supernatural powers." *Whatever. I'll play along with him, then.* "Anyway, my vision becomes one with Jack the Stabber's." *But it's kind of sad that despite 'playing along,' I was only telling the truth.*

"Which means…you have seen Jack the Stabber's face, haven't you?" Hiroyuki's tone was cheerful. Only that, though. His face was dead-serious. "That's amazing. Genuinely. So are they a man? A woman? How old?"

"No," she shook her head. "I don't know."

"You don't?" A letdown surfaced on his face. "And why is that? Are they the type not to look into mirrors in their everyday life?"

"Our visions only merge starting right before Jack the Stabber kills someone until right after the murder."

"And not at any other time?"

"No."

"Hmm," Hiroyuki put the straw in his mouth. "That's inconvenient," he said before sipping on his milkshake. "Are you not eating? It has cooled down enough, I bet."

"I will."

She had no appetite.

"I see… Here I assumed you had already met them."

"Ah, well, I did just once," Asumi answered honestly. "In that same building. A long time ago."

"You've met them and still don't know their gender or age?"

Hiroyuki narrowed his eyes.

"They were about to kill me so I ran away on the spot. …Probably."

Her memories were vague so she couldn't assert it.

"You're a fast runner, huh."

"Not especially."

She felt miffed for some reason.

“And you haven’t met them since?”

“No.”

“Say, ” Hiroyuki modestly smiled. *Thinking of it, I haven’t told him my name. Well, not that it matters.*“How about we work together?”

“Together…”

That invitation took her by surprise.

“You want to see Jack the Stabber, don’t you?”

An enticing phrasing.

“I…possibly.”

“To tell you the truth, so do I. No, I *must* meet them.”

A suggestive phrasing.

“You must meet them?”

“See, we share a common goal,” Hiroyuki faintly nodded. “Your ability is akin to a radar, don’t you think? Arresting Jack the Stabber shouldn’t be out of reach if we rely on it.”

“But it’s not that simple. Seeing what happens *during* the murder isn’t much useful to track them down, and most of the time I have no idea where in the country they even are…”

“It should be a cinch with my help.” Where did that confidence come from? “Well, just trust me and see where it goes for the moment. Think of it as giving Popeye a can of spinach.”

“Um…what do you imply by working together, concretely?”

“Whenever your vision connects to Jack the Stabber’s eyes, report everything you saw to me. That’s all.”

“Is that really all?”

“It is.” Hiroyuki unwrapped his fish burger. “Any complaints?”

“…Ah, no.”

Asumi was confused at the strange turn of events. Why should she cooperate with such a bizarre man? In the first place…who even was Ketouin Hiroyuki? The only thing she knew for sure was that he was the type of person she hated the most.

“Let me guess, you don’t trust me, do you?” He suddenly asked. He hit the bullseye. “Do you not like the idea of working with me?”

“…Please tell me your objective,” Asumi swallowed her saliva. “What’s your imperative to meet Jack the Stabber?”

“Trade secret. I can’t tell you the details,” Hiroyuki answered briefly, but firmly. “That information would be meaningless to you, wouldn’t it? Naturally, I won’t ask for your reason either. Let’s not delve into the other’s privacy. Our cooperation shall remain impersonal.”

What should I do?

What should I do?

Working at two was certainly more convenient. One cannot partake in three-legged races alone. On the other hand, though, Asumi wasn’t keen on teaming up with a stranger (especially someone hiding such a cold gaze in his eyes). However, the situation was slowly yet surely robbing her of her freedom of choice…

“Okay, okay, I get it so stop glaring at me so hard,” Hiroyuki put up a strained smile. It seemed she had started glaring at him without realizing. “I’ve always seemed to have something that makes all girls hate me. The only time I’ve been popular with girls was during middle school.” He then stared at Asumi’s eyes for a few moments before suddenly looking up and glaring at the ceiling. “Say, you didn’t lie to me about your superpowers, did you?”

“…I didn’t, it’s all true.”

Asumi answered, thinking to herself it was probably a mistake not to instead say ‘Actually it was all a joke.’

“You see, I’m in a situation where I want to grasp at any straws I can find.”

“And I’m that straw?”

“Well, in this case…” Hiroyuki casually admitted. “But any new piece of information about Jack the Stabber is hard to come by. The police are useless. Honestly, I was about to give up…then you appeared.” Hiroyuki lowered his gaze from the ceiling to Asumi’s eyes. “I don’t know if you’re lying, delusional, or telling the truth, but you seem to have a connection with Jack

the Stabber. There's no doubting it. Right? If we manage to find Jack the Stabber, ultimately, I'll hand them to you. You might not believe me, but I swear I will. So please, let's work together."

"U-um," the stakes had been elevated. "Hold on a minute..."

"I know, this isn't a game."

"That's not what I mean."

"We're pursuing a murderer. I don't fear death. That's determination for you. The determination to fight to the death."

"No, what I'm—"

"Right, to begin with, the kanji for 'to fight' is—"

"Shut up!" Asumi slapped her fist on the table. Hiroyuki's milkshake tipped over. A few people looked over at them. "Are you talking that way on purpose?"

"You're surprisingly deft, huh," Hiroyuki glanced at his milkshake, but didn't attempt to pick it up. It seemed empty. "As an apology, let me show you a proof of my determination."

He showed a glimpse of a black, metallic object in his clothes.

A gun.

"I couldn't get a Magnum like in *Dirty Harry*, but well, still better than what the JSDF has, isn't it?"

"I-is t-that..." the shock made her stagger in her words. "I-is that a real one?"

"You really can't put your doubts away, huh. Shall we pull the trigger, then?"

8

"I want to take a bath...please."

I asked Mikuni Akiko if she had any request, and she whispered that from her chair. She seemed cramped next to Toudou Yumie. How were they managing their number twos? Still, they imperatively needed to be

restrained, so I couldn't move them elsewhere. Not like there was any other fitting spot than near the barred window.

"Is that your wish?"

As usual, I was seated on a bed with broken springs.

"Yes."

Mikuni Akiko faintly nodded, fully wearing her fear and anxiety on her face.

"Well...that's fair. Not taking a bath is like torture for girls, after all."

I took a look at Mikuni Akiko and Toudou Yumie. Their hair was disheveled and their clothes dirtied here and there. Toudou Yumie was in an especially awful state. Some sweat had dried on her neck and turned dark, making her body odor pungent.

"A bath is a bit too hard, but...oh, I think I can get you a kiddie pool. You know, the vinyl ones."

"That would be good enough."

Mikuni Akiko was staring at the garbage-ridden floor.

"Will you answer one of my requests too?" Toudou Yumie cunningly asked.

"Ask away."

I prompted her with the palm of my hand.

"Let us out of here."

"I can't."

"Heh."

She backed down quickly, as though she wasn't expecting anything.

"You're quick to back down, huh."

So I said it out loud.

"I don't really mind. Either way, it's only a matter of time before the police arrest you." Wow, what a claim. "They should have long tracked down your position by now... An officer is currently knocking on your door after finally obtaining an arrest warrant."

She crossed her legs with a calm expression. ...When she hadn't taken a bath in so long.

"My, my, what a hopelessly wishful expectation."

"Is it really?"

"Think about it, we have absolutely nothing in common. So even if the police investigated your case as a kidnapping, my name wouldn't come out. Got it?"

"Uh, I don't think that's really the case..." Mikuni Akiko timidly objected.

"What?"

My tone turned fierce.

"Ah, nothing..."

She panicked and shook her head, then returned her gaze to the dusty floor.

"Sorry, I'm not mad, you see." What a pain to deal with. "I was just really surprised. I didn't mean to speak that loudly..."

"That's his real nature," Toudou Yumie butted in.

"You can speak with me without holding back. I won't get mad or anything."

I paid no heed to her and reassured Mikuni Akiko. She started speaking, still sounding afraid.

"Yes...you might be right if you had only kidnapped Yumie-chan. Ehm...you have nothing in common, so you wouldn't get caught unless someone witnessed you," she wiped the sweat off her neck. "But you have kidnapped me as well. The police might not, but wouldn't our fathers...the people who drove your little sister to death, have someone in mind with a motive sufficient to kidnap Yumie-chan and me?"

"Yeah..." I was genuinely impressed at Mikuni Akiko's insight. "You might have a point."

"Attagirl, great observation, Akiko-chan," Toudou Yumie praised her. "You're absolutely right. Yes, absolutely. Our fathers have already reported you to the police. My condolences."

"But you know," a question popped in my mind, "informing the police would be suicidal for your fathers. I mean, they can't tell the truth, can they? 'Actually we kidnapped and raped that guy's little sister'...they just can't."

"But they might be investigating on their own," Toudou Yumie persisted.

"Hiring a detective and all?"

"That, I don't know, but they wouldn't just give up on us."

"Such wonderful bonds," I extolled and left the bed. "Making me jealous."

"That's just normal behavior in a family. Or is that not how yours work? Is it full of heartless people?"

"Beats me. I'm keeping in contact with them, but I would hesitate to call that having a bond. Still, at least we feel overly connected on a psychological front. Though that's just my interpretation."

"Being too connected is the root of madness."

"Well, I'll bring you a pool later."

I left the room.

Then silently made my way out of the hospital.

I looked up at the bright sun.

Being too connected is the root of madness?

How dare you...

That not only insulted me, but also Sana and my entire family. There's nothing more irritating to the ear than insults at family. That's why heroes of justice are always lone wolves. The lonelier they are, the higher their defense will be. Did I need to further my solitude to establish myself more firmly? Luckily, the duty to answer that question wasn't on me. Pope or Hope or whatshisname, tell me, if there's really a place angels fear to tread, why don't they just fly? They're angels.[24]

Wait...what was I thinking about? Could I think in this way because I was an adherent to the abominable and wonderful Kagami family? But in the end these were hollow howls. All bark and no bite. The bear doing acrobatics was

[24] Addressing *An Essay on Criticism by* Alexander Pope, from which contains many famous lines such as "For fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

just a guy in a costume. Mine were laughably and decisively different from the premeditated (?) howls of the likes of Guitar Wolf or Michelle.[25] And yet I couldn't take strides like Supercar either. Half-assed on all fronts.

Under this blue sky, I reminisced about the sacred deceased, Kagami Yuna.

The eldest daugther who had committed suicide. She was of the ilk who would try having a bear put on the costume of an acrobatic bear—not quite, I wasn't appraising her as an individual—she was of a great genius. No, that wasn't it either. The eldest wasn't a genius at all. Geniuses just don't commit suicide.

Still no good... That was the best depiction I could offer with my current train of thought which went like hand-drawn 3D graphs. I couldn't explain the eldest skillfully. At best I could disclose a few charming and mundane episodes about her. The eldest's world wasn't one I should be speaking of. I shall seal my ears and mouth until a more sophisticated narrator hidden amongst the family or the ghost of the eldest herself opens theirs.

Back when I was young enough that my life revolved around watching anime on the TV and eating snacks at 5, the eldest, a bit past 20 then, pulled me by the hand to go to a supermarket in the neighborhood. On the way, I found ants forming a line near the road and crushed them with my shoes like a frenzied Gulliver.

Seeing me, she smiled and advised that, if I were to kill any, I should limit myself to three. Quite puzzled at her words, I asked her why killing only three was permitted; she put up an even brighter smile and said: The braves are always three in number.

I could get it now.

I could delude myself into thinking I got it.

And finally...a genuine urge to kill surged within me.

---

[25] Guitar Wolf and Thee Michelle Gun Elephant are big Japanese garage rock bands.

Chapter 5

I Tried Putting Up a Front

1

‘Was the man with you in Building F your boyfriend?’

So he can also engage in mundane topics... Needless to say, Asumi wasn’t capable of such collected reflections until quite a while later.

She had been seen with Ketouin Hiroyuki.

She vacantly looked at the outside world through her window. *It’s okay, I’m in no danger. I don’t see anyone suspicious looking at me. Not even anyone standing out in any fashion. So there’s no danger. There’s no danger. There’s no danger. Now, take deep breaths. Calm down, calm down.*

Even so, her negative emotions stuck to her like burning marks on a frying pan. And no wonder; this was the first time he had assaulted her psyche with an eyewitness testimony.

...I’m being watched.

That concern wore her mind down even more so than usual. She grabbed her mobile phone from atop the table, looked for the number of the individual she had in mind, and gave it a call.

“Yo, it’s been an eternity,” after waiting through eight rings, she heard Hiroyuki’s voice. “What’s up? Ah, let me guess, you want another date—”

“Shut up,” terse words unconsciously flowed out of her mouth. “I received a letter from Jack the Stabber.”

“A letter...oh right, you mentioned those.” She had presented him with all information at her disposal after deciding on working together. “When did it arrive?”

“This morning, in my mailbox...”

“Any postmark?”

“None. It was delivered directly this time.”

His letters always arrived through one of two patterns: delivered by the postal services, or inserted directly into her mailbox with no stamp or postmark—probably by himself. This one was a case of the latter. Unfortunately.

“So, what did it say? Mind reading it out for me?”

“...It says, ‘Was the man with you in Building F your boyfriend?’” Asumi solemnly read it.

“Ahaha, at least they didn’t see us leaving a hotel.”

“Keep these jokes to yourself.”

I’m being serious here.

“No need to get angry,” Hiroyuki said casually. “Huh, but it’s a bummer we were seen. Still, where could they have been watching us from?”

“Where...?”

“The letter only says ‘the man with you in Building F,’ right?”

“And what about it?”

“Think about it, did they see us inside Building F or as we were leaving it? Doesn’t that difference make you curious?”

“Inside...” An abominable thought rushed through her brain. Her brain started shaking, so she hurriedly sat on her sofa. “They saw us inside...”

“That would be the amusing option,” Hiroyuki sounded genuinely entertained. “Like...Jack the Stabber was actually standing behind the door to the room with the corpse we were in!”

“Stop it!” she reflexively screamed. “There’s nothing amusing about that.”

“You’re pretty high-strung, eh.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Do you have any more info to share?”

“None.”

“Any connections?”

“None.”

“You’re spending all day naying, huh,” Hiroyuki made a strange remark. There was probably no deeper meaning to it. “Still, it’s such a bummer that Jack the Stabber saw my face...”

“Is it bad that they know how you look?”

“Well, it’s easier to move around if they don’t,” Hiroyuki answered. “And they won’t target me.”

“…”

“Ah, that was a joke, don’t stress it. See ya.”

He hung up on her.

Asumi threw her phone away. It hit the wall. Then regret hit her. *I knew I shouldn’t have accepted that fishy guy’s proposition.* She wasn’t even sure he was truly her ally, let alone a useful one.

However, the gun was real.

After they left the fast food, she shot it under a nearby bridge. It made a sound drier than she’d imagined and recoiled harder than she’d imagined. The smell of gunpowder. The tiny hole on the asphalt road. It was, without any doubt, a real gun. However, Hiroyuki had skillfully avoided mentioning where he’d obtained it from. But Asumi didn’t care about that. She only saw importance in the dry fact that Hiroyuki possessed a gun.

With that on our side…we might be able to rival him.

Rival.

Fight.

Fighting on equal terms.

Asumi looked over at the clock. 3:40 PM. It was soon time for her date. She left her house, wearing a jacket more classy then her usual fit and more makeup than usual, then started walking to her destination.

It was the fifth of September. A Wednesday, the middle of the week. On that day, it was even hotter outside than she had anticipated before leaving the house. Just walking made her sweat.

Speaking of summer…the Kagami siblings used to take me to the ocean regularly. We would go in Yuna’s car along with Kimihiko, Sana, and Ryouko; the five of us. Ryouko, for some reason, only looked at the ocean and never went in the water. To this day I remember vividly the time Yuna dropped her yakisoba on the beach house’s floor because of something specific that had happened.

Asumi wasn't obsessed with how great the old times were, but that didn't mean she couldn't feel nostalgic. However, despite enjoying indulging in nostalgia, she hated the feeling of unease that inevitably came after, so she avoided continuing that train of thought further.

Suddenly, she felt a gaze from behind and turned around.

Who is it?

No,

It's no one.

All she could see was a mundane world.

A town as rural as it gets.

...I'm overthinking it.

That must be the case. She was a bit nervous because of that letter. Even if he was a criminal, he had work and things to take care of (probably). So...he likely didn't have the time to be tailing Asumi that often. Either way, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Asumi started trotting. That made her sweat even more profusely.

Thanks to her elevated pace, she reached her destination, a supermarket (an Ito-Yokado that doesn't see many customers), about ten minutes early. She entered the coffee shop Socie she was to meet him at, and chose a seat as far in the back as was available. There weren't many customers. Kimihiko wasn't here yet. Asumi wiped away the glimmer of sweat that had formed on her face and drank the water she was served. She then ordered an iced coffee.

...Say, Asumi, do you mind giving me some of your time tomorrow?

The day prior, Kimihiko had called her. Without notice. Moreover, sounding strangely jovial. A voice coming from a cheerful and energetic mind she couldn't imagine from him, who'd worn a gloomy expression ever since Sana's suicide. Asumi found that more eerie than reassuring. To her, his voice was one of someone who had messed up big time.

Even so, she was happy to meet Kimihiko after not seeing him for so long. Asumi certainly didn't hate him. Rather, she appreciated how needlessly

brusque he could be. That being said, there was not a trace of romantic feelings in that appreciation.

She sometimes saw childhood friends who eventually became lovers or got married on the TV, but Asumi couldn't empathize with them. She didn't believe a man and a woman could progress (she had some reticence in calling that a progression) to that kind of relationship after spending so much time together. At the very least, Asumi and Kimihiko weren't like that.

She looked at the clock buried into the coffee shop's pillar. It was a few minutes away from the time she and Kimihiko had set.

2

It was especially hot today. And humid. I felt like I would ferment if I stayed still.

I was driving while taking swigs of Coca-Cola. A pro of colas is that they reduce food expenses. That's it, that's my meaningless discovery.

I reached a toy store I hadn't visited since my last year of elementary school. I paid no heed to Gundam models or trading cards, and solely looked for pools...found it. There were a few models of vinyl pools under the kickboards. I bought an XL-size one. It was somewhat pricey but I turned a blind eye to it. It was summer, after all.

The pool business done, I then drove to Ketouin Yuika's high school. Class C, the one she was in, had P.E. classes in their sixth period on Wednesdays. I examined the crowd of girls on the sports grounds.

However—

...Huh?

Nowhere.

She was nowhere.

I couldn't find Ketouin Yuika.

What had happened? I'd slacked on my tailing duty that morning so I didn't know if she was absent today. Or maybe she'd suddenly gotten feverish

and was resting in the infirmary. Or maybe she was still in the changing room (it was plenty possible given how dull she was).

No.

A horrible thought surged up in my mind.

...She got wary?

That would be the worst.

A hopeless crisis.

...The police might not, but wouldn't our fathers...the people who drove your little sister to death, have someone in mind with a motive sufficient to kidnap Yumie-chan and I?

Mikuni Akiko's words replayed in my head.

I had kidnapped Toudou Yumie and Mikuni Akiko. That was more than enough to let them sense something was coming. They might already be protecting Ketouin's granddaughter.

"Crap..."

I muttered, looking at the sports grounds. If Ketouin Yuika was confined inside that manor, she would be completely out of my reach. Cagliostro's castle.

I continued watching the grounds for some time with faint hope in my heart, but Ketouin Yuika never showed up. I clicked my tongue and moved on.

3

"...Huh? I even came with more food and you don't want it?"

"Your face sure is something right now."

Toudou Yumie looked at my face with great wonder. When she herself looked like a homeless woman due to fatigue and bad hygiene.

"Let's both refrain from commenting on the other's face."

I dropped the bag with provisions and the deflated pool in front of them. Mikuni Akiko flinched. Geez, her attitude was seriously getting on my nerves. Sometimes even more so than Toudou Yumie's. I was mad.

“Are you scared?” I was smiling.

Mikuni Akiko didn’t answer. She couldn’t since she was biting her lips.

“Are you scared?” I asked a second time. In a harsher tone.

“…I am.”

“Color me sorry, Miss,” I sat on the bed with broken springs. It had become a tradition at this point. “Well, this is only happening because your dad is a rapist scumbag. If you wanna resent someone, choose your biological dad for his fucked up hobby.”

Mikuni Akiko’s eyes moistened.

“Hey hey, don’t cry. Not on me,” I warned her sternly. “Were you taught by your parents that crying will resolve any problem? Oh…right, your dad’s a gangrapist fucker, I forgot, if he had the time to be educating his kid—”

“Stop it!”

Mikuni Akiko covered her ears. Her right ear with her hand, and her left ear with her shoulder. Running away by not listening? What a coward.

Aah, she pissed me off.

I grabbed Mikuni Akiko’s arm and ripped it off her ear. She resisted, but there was no chance I would lose against a frail lady.

“Don’t you fucking run away!” I screamed earnestly. “Accept it! Accept this reality! Accept that you’re the daughter of a rapist!”

“Noooo!”

“You’re going too far. Apologize!”

“Shut up, you cattle on a leash.”

Toudou Yumie knocked her chair down and jumped on me. So impolite to stand up before me. I kicked her and slammed her against the wall like a puppy.

Fuck you.

My impulses were intensifying.

FUCK YOU.

Kill her.

Kill her.

I heard Sana's voice.

Onii-chan, kill her.

No that's wrong You're only using Sana This is but your own—Hey whose fucking voice was that Why am I hearing voices inside my head Aaaah Shut up!

"Your dads went too far!" I affirmed in a scream. Toudou Yumie seemed to have hit her head; she was pressing against it in pain. But she still had one hand attached to the iron bar so she couldn't even sleep. See, that's what you get. "...Want me to kill you for real?"

I kicked Toudou Yumie. I kicked her. I kicked her. I kicked her. I kicked her. I couldn't suppress my urge to kill. Far from that, I could feel it growing bigger.

"S-stop tha—" Toudou Yumie said between coughs.

"Bossing others around even on the ground? Ladies don't disappoint, eh? You got my respect."

"Aaaaaah!" Mikuni Akiko started crying like a baby. This fucker, how dare she ignore my stern warning?

"...You couldn't hear me tell you to stop crying?"

I stopped my attacks towards Toudou Yumie and towered over Mikuni Akiko.

"I-I could hear you," Mikuni Akiko answered in tears.

"Then don't fucking cry!"

I strangled Mikuni Akiko. She flapped her legs and tried to resist, but what could a little girl do? I continued to strangle her. She groaned in pain as her face turned red like an apple until she fainted. The legs of the folding chair Mikuni Akiko was sitting on were making a ruckus rattling...aah, it was getting annoying.

Then,

I got hit something fierce from behind.

An intense pain.

It pierced through my flesh and resounded in my bones.

I collapsed onto the ground., my face plunging into the pungent garbage littered everywhere. Some sticky liquid got on my face.

I stuck my head out of the garbage and looked behind me. A folding chair was mounted on my back like a turtle shell. Behind it, Toudou Yumie was holding the chair's legs and glaring at me with all intentions to kill me.

This bitch.

However, Toudou Yumie cared not for my feelings; she continued directing her glare full of hostility and bloodthirst straight at me.

"I'll kill you."

I couldn't immediately tell if those words had come out of my mouth or of Toudou Yumie's.

Toudou Yumie raised the chair up. With surprising strength given she could only use her right arm. However, I wasn't stupid enough to wait for her to swing it down. I twisted my body and kicked her right arm from the ground. Right on. I flung the folding chair away from her hands. I used the kick's recoil to swiftly stand up then sunk a frog leap uppercut-like punch into Toudou Yumie's solar plexus. She promptly collapsed. Looked like it got to her good. But I wasn't so tolerant or stupid to stop hitting her after one punch. It's not an exaggeration to say any amount of pity will devour 60% of one's life.

I took out a key from my pocket and unlocked Toudou Yumie's handcuffs. I then mounted her—like they do in MMA fights—and started hitting her face with all my might.

Her visage shapeshifted at my every punch. Even if she tried to get away, I was sitting on her chest and wouldn't let her. Mikuni Akiko screamed a few times. But I ignored her and continued to punch. Throwing punches after punches.

Serves you right.

Fuck you.

And die.

Die. Her nose started bleeding. Die. Her eyelid got cut. Die. Her teeth broke. Die. She coughed out blood. Die. Her skin tore off. Die. Her forehead got split. Die.

My anger wasn't sated. I went to grab the chair she'd nailed onto my back and wrecked her as hard as I could. *Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam.* On her face, on her chest, on her arms, on her legs, everywhere. The chair's legs bent.

When I was satisfied…I got away from Toudou Yumie.

She lay there inert and didn't move.

She had trouble breathing.

Her bloody face was gross.

I could barely pick up her cursing me.

Her lips cursing me were swollen.

Her breathing got even rougher.

Her red blood flowed off her forehead onto the ground.

Her chest was furiously going up and down.

Even so, I left her to herself.

I had no obligation to help her out.

Eventually…

She stopped breathing.

And died.

Toudou Yumie was dead.

D-e-a-d?

Woah, seriously?

That was anticlimactic.

I guess that's all there is to it.

Mikuni Akiko sobbed and pissed herself. What a dirty bitch. Unfortunately for her, I had no such fetishes.

My fists were sullied with her blood and swollen red. Vivid pain coursing through them. I used these very hands to drag the corpse to the hospital room facing this one and left it there. Just in case, I handcuffed its arms and legs

and set up my spare padlock onto the door. Well, she was dead so that was meaningless anyway.

When I came back to room 206, Mikuni Akiko had stopped crying. She was standing, looking down, and barely able to keep herself from falling. Her tartan skirt was dripping wet.

"Hey."

She didn't answer.

———

Heh...it's rare for Asumi to skip school to go shopping, Jack the Stabber thought as they tailed her. *Is she buying her boyfriend a birthday gift...but I'll refrain from mundane remarks.*

Asumi entered the coffee shop across the donuts store on the Yokado's first floor. She didn't seem to have come here to shop. She sat at a table for two on the aisle side. Was she waiting for someone? Jack the Stabber felt like approaching her further, but didn't enter the shop.

They bought three donuts from the store across the coffee shop, then went around looking at different food stalls. Soy sauce, milk, and pork were cheap today. Murderers, too, liked bargains. Though they didn't have a lot of cash on them so they couldn't buy much.

In this world, neither saints nor criminals could stay away from working. There existed, undeniably, a few techniques to avoid it, and it is entirely possible to sum these as stemming from the desire to 'run away' or 'take it easy,' however, people tacitly know from the onset that the more they work, the less they have to work; that's why everyone works. It was set in stone.

They returned to the coffee shop. Asumi was still inside. Still no one else in sight. *Now, did he dump her? Wait no, again, let's not go there.*

...Asumi.

It was a mystery.

How had this woman shown up at the crime scene?

Asumi had shown up after both murders inside Building F.

How...did she know?

Had she set up security cameras in that building?

Or did Asumi have superpowers?

That was a real question Jack the Stabber had. Outside of Hokkaido was safe, but murdering someone inside, especially near Asumi, was anything but—

Ah.

Then...Jack the Stabber received a revelation. Revelations always appear suddenly, detached from any context. Inspiration is a shiny jewel.

Jack the Stabber examined that sudden idea carefully.

Then debated it.

The answer was—yes.

It was risky...but also worth trying.

If everything went well, they could witness how Asumi was doing it.

Jack the Stabber gave themselves permission to proceed.

But one cannot fight with an empty stomach, so they would first eat. Jack the Stabber sat on a bench on the first floor and ate the donuts they had just bought. They were kind of tasteless. One star. Whatever, as long as it filled their stomach.

Once finished with the donuts, they gave someone a call.

"Yeees, who is it?" A girl's charming voice resounded in their eardrums.

"Hi."

"...Ah, hello. What is it? Hmm...I can hear noises in the background. Are you at Yokado?"

"Great guess," Jack the Stabber was surprised. "Err, how did you know?"

"There was an announcement."

"Ahh."

"So, what did you call me for?"

"Can you come over right now?"

"Eh, to Yokado? I mean, I'm in class."

She didn't seem overjoyed.

"I know I'm asking a lot, but even so."

"...Ah," that glacial voice was enough for her to decipher Jack the Stabber's intention. "Are we going to carry it out?"

Jack the Stabber didn't answer. By principle they didn't answer questions when they didn't need to.

"Then let's meet up at the arcade on the second floor."

"Understood. Um..."

"Mm?"

"Ah, no, nothing. See you."

The girl said cheerfully.

Jack the Stabber hung up.

They headed for the arcade. However, there was a security camera on the way there. *I'll take a detour. The room in the back should be a good spot for murder. After that...*

Jack the Stabber's mind was as cool as a deep-sea fish sleeping at the bottom of the ocean.

4

"My bad, I'm late," I joined hands in front of my face. Needless to say, I was late because of Toudou Yumie. "I'll pay for the meal so please forgive me."

"Don't mind it," Asumi, seated across from me, looked at the shop's clock."Also you're only 15 minutes late, it's fine."

"Even so, I insist, I'll pay."

"Thank you."

Asumi answered with a smile.

I ordered a cheesecake and an iced coffee from the waitress while Asumi ordered a strawberry parfait.

“You’ll get fat if you eat that,” I said, fed up. “It doesn’t matter for uglies, but you’re pretty, it’s a waste.”

“I don’t put on weight easily. Jealous, aren’t you?”

“Not really. I’m the same.”

“Huh, first time I’m hearing about it.”

“Really? I’m the only one in the family that never gets fat no matter how much I eat,” I wiped off my sweat. “Oh right, there’s an exception. Since Naomi is anorexic.”

“...Huh?”

“Mm?” Asumi exclaimed, so I froze as I was wiping my sweat off. “What’s up?”

“What happened to your hands? Aren’t they swollen?”

“Aah...yeah.” I hurriedly hid my hands. “It’s nothing, I hit them somewhere.” I couldn’t be honest and say it’s because I’d punched someone to death.

“Are you okay?”

“It’s not a big deal. I’m sturdy, I swear,” I smiled. “You can’t get much sturdier than me. But to explain why I’m so sturdy in the first place—”

“Kimihiko-kun,” Asumi said with a nostalgic smile. “You’ve cheered up, huh.”

“Eh? Ah, yeah,” I put up a smile to hide my embarrassment. “Well, you know, sorry for the trouble and all.”

“Not at all, it’s okay.”

Asumi took her iced coffee’s straw in her mouth.

“I’m fine now. I fully recovered. I won’t flinch at anything.”

I wasn’t lying. I had just killed Toudou Yumie, and yet I was composed inside. What more convincing proof can you get?

“I’m glad,” Asumi let out a sigh of relief. This girl, she was once again acting like a nosy housewife. “You’ve finally cheered up, Kimihiko-kun.”

“But what about you? You don’t seem to be doing that well,” I said. In fact, there were traces of fatigue on her face.

“Do I?” Asumi tilted her head. An undeniable gloom hidden in her expression. “But…you might be right.”

“What happened? You’re putting a damper on my comeback celebration party.”

“Sorry.”

“No, seriously, what happened?”

“Well, a few things.”

Asumi rested both hands on her knees and hung her head.

“I can’t know with just that. Tell me the reason. Ah, or is it something you can’t tell me?”

“It’s okay. …It’s not a big deal, really,” Asumi looked at me with perplexed eyes. “Don’t worry. Everyone has their own problems, you know.”

“But not everyone holds them to the same degree of importance.”

I spoke from experience.

“It’s fine, my problems are trivial compared to yours.”

“You can’t measure problems objectively.”

I spoke from experience.

“You’ve really…cheered up, huh,” Asumi said so and closed one of her eyes in an affected manner. She then drank more of her iced coffee. I couldn’t say anything. I doubt there exists a man out there who can stay unphased after witnessing a girl’s unnatural wink.

The waitress brought my cheesecake and iced coffee. Apparently the parfait wasn’t ready quite yet.

“Huh, they’re pretty fast,” I forced myself to say anything. “Might even be faster than at Yoshinoya.”

“…Sorry.”

Asumi hung her head.

“Eh?”

“I’m making it awkward, aren’t I?”

“Nah,” blatant lies are so pitiful. “I’m totally—”

“Let me have a bite of that cheesecake.”

Asumi picked up her fork and stabbed it in the cheesecake before me.

"Geez, you can be cunning when you want," I laughed. "Who did you take after?"

"That's a secret," Asumi answered and brought the cheesecake piece to her mouth.

"How does it taste?"

I asked for banter.

But Asumi didn't answer.

5

A connection? Now...? Geez, I wish he'd respect my schedule a minimum.

Her vision became hazy until it turned pure white like a panda's back.

Aah, what do I do? Now the date is ruined. Why did he choose such a horrible timing? Couldn't he have killed yesterday at least, she thought to herself. One might find it ludicrous, but to her, a maniac when it comes to being on schedule, it was most natural to think that way.

Her vision connected to his...to Jack the Stabber's.

Beautiful polygons displayed on an LCD screen. Carefully-crafted pixel art. A vehicle shaped like a bike. A giant Anpanman. A Beatmania, not so common these days. He seemed to be in an arcade this time around. What a carefree guy.

There was a girl in a uniform next to him. She was directing a healthy, bright smile at him. She seemed to be the murder target this time. This girl, too...was smiling.

Behind her, a familiar bookstore. And even further behind, a familiar general store. *Eh?*

...Familiar? What?

Asumi was flabbergasted.

Yokado.

He's right here!

Yokado's arcade should be on the second floor...

Err,

So,

That means...

He is right above me.

He walked, along with the girl, into a space indicated to be a 'Rest Area,' a small distance detached from the arcade. That indeed was in a blind spot to other people, but only because it was a recessed part of the hallway, not because of any concrete partition. As Asumi remembered it, it should be a simple room with a few sofas, ashtrays, and a vending machine.

They sat on a white sofa. They were the only two people in the room.

Don't tell me...is he going to do it there?

It's empty, sure, but this is a big store. And there's no telling when someone could enter.

What...what in the world is he thinking? If he kills her there, it would cause an uproar the moment someone finds her corpse. Has he gone mad for good?

The girl suddenly stood up and knelt before him. She then closed her eyes with a faint smile.

He took out the infamous knife from his hip pocket.

He then plainly stabbed her.

The girl collapsed onto the sofa.

The connection severed.

Her vision returned to normal.

To Kimihiko, looking at her awkwardly.

"...O—"

6

What's wrong? Asumi froze like a mannequin. Had she found her vocation as a mannequin or what? Or had she fainted with her eyes still open? Either way, something abnormal was going on.

“Hey, hey, Asumi,” I called her name in a low-enough voice so the people around us wouldn’t notice. “What’s wrong? Why did you go silent? Hear me?”

No reactions.

“Hey, come one…gimme an answer.”

No reactions.

Asumi was frozen, cheesecake in mouth, and wouldn’t move an inch. And I doubt she’d transformed into a frozen mackerel…

“Asumi.”

What in the world was happening? I was awfully confused. I’d never known her to have a chronic illness. Could it be an acute one? That would be terrible. I had to call an ambulance as fast as I could.

“…O—”

Just when I thought my fears were confirmed, Asumi suddenly woke up. But her eyes were empty, looking in the distance.

“Hey Asumi—”

“Oh no!”

Asumi pushed her chair away as she jumped on her feet before rushing out the coffee shop at terrific speed. The few customers all looked at her leaving.

What the fuck? Her parfait hadn’t even arrived yet. I couldn’t make sense of it. Puzzled (but displaying a facade of absolute composedness), I sipped on my iced coffee.

“…Guh!” The inconceivable development made me spit out the entire contents of my mouth. “Gack, guck, geh…”

Naturally, the eyes of the other customers focused on me. However, I had no time to care about those.

There was a donut store across this coffee shop (not a Mister Donut, an old store not hiding the traces of its longevity).

In front of that store,

There was Ketouin Yuika.

Of course I would spit out my coffee if I saw that. At least be grateful my gastric juices didn’t come out. Err, I said to no one.

Wearing plain clothes (a white cutsew and a skirt longer than knee-length; a simple look), Ketouin Yuika was buying donuts. An old lady wearing an apron handed her a bag, which she accepted without ever breaking her inexistent expression before slowly walking away.

I came to my senses and recalled my mission.

...This is the moment.

I had to cherish this chance God had gifted me. The same could be said by all of humanity, but I couldn't care less about humanity at the moment. I stood up, panicking like an idiot, left 3000 yen at the register, and left the store. Then, I went after Ketouin Yuika.

By that point, I had completely forgotten about Asumi.

7

She dodged the people before her and rushed up the escalator.

Her call got through.

"Can you hear me?"

She arrived on the second floor, then ran for the arcade.

"Yo. Calling me twice in the same day? I knew it, you love—"

"Please, shut up," Asumi interrupted Hiroyuki. "Can you head out now?"

"Sorry, I'm a bit busy."

"Huh?"

"You see, I'm at Yokado right now," Hiroyuki said. "I'm eating lunch at the okonomiyaki shop—"

"Idiot!"

"This is the first time someone has called me that word."

"I'm uh, I...just had a connection to Jack the Stabber. Th-the scenery was, it was..."

"What about the scenery?"

"What?"

She had a hard time talking while running.

"Okay, please, calm down."

"I'm very calm."

"You don't sound like it, though," he laughed. "Aren't you out of breath? What are you doing? Oh, oh, don't tell me, having se—"

"I'm running!"

"On your jogging?"

"You have your gun on you, right?" Asumi asked, still running. She dodged through the crowd and passed in front of a bookstore.

"Of course."

He answered like he had been born with it attached to his body.

"Listen…care…fully," the arcade was in sight. "I saw Jack the Stabber kill a girl in the rest area near the Yokado's arcade on the—"

The call ended.

The bookstore behind her, she passed in front of the general store. She reached the arcade. But Asumi didn't stop to appreciate the noise going on inside. She was overwhelmed by an indescriptible pressure. She knew full well that her heart's frenzied beating was only a result of her daily lack of exercise.

Err, for now…right, I should take deep breaths. Breathe in, breathe out. Asumi readied herself in a half measure, then took a step towards the rest area. Past the arcade corner, the hallway split sideways. On the left, to the toilets, and on the right, to the rest area.

Asumi held her breath and walked on. The arcade's ruckus faded in the distance.

A red arrow under the rest area's nameplate.

It meant the rest area was right past the corner.

She knew that. Asumi hesitated for a fraction of a second, but since she also knew that wavering wouldn't improve the situation, she threw her doubts away and broke the corner.

There was a small space before her. That was the rest area. A vending machine in the corner. Sofas and ashtrays on all sides. The neighborhood's bulletin board and houseplants.

And,

The girl she'd seen in the connection, lying flaccid on the sofa.

Dyeing the sofa's white fabric red.

Her neck was, naturally, stabbed by a knife.

...She's dead.

It was obvious at a glance.

Asumi paid no heed to the object she quickly deemed to be a corpse, and instead looked around the rest area. There was no hiding spot. She considered checking behind the ceiling, but only Spiderman could hide there so she merely glanced at it.

...I missed him.

Well, it's not a surprise. He didn't do it somewhere he could loiter around. We were in a supermarket. People could come in at any moment. He must've been restless.

...But why?

Why did he choose to murder her here?

There was no reason.

There was nothing to gain.

There was nothing but risk on the line. Then why did he decide to...

Asumi walked to the vending machine. She felt terribly thirsty, perhaps thanks to the pressure vanishing from her shoulders. She inserted a 500-yen coin in the slit. Asumi extended an arm to press the buttons.

When, suddenly, her movements got brutally restrained.

Her neck and upper body were held tight.

It hurts. I can't breathe.

This is,

Human arms.

She got goosebumps.

She could only move her legs freely.

But she was too afraid to control those properly either.

Her neck...was met with a cold, shining object.

...A knife.

She didn't need to see it to know.

The vending machine's button was flickering in red.

8

Where was Ketouin Yuika? There were four possibilities: She was on the first floor, she'd gone to the second floor, she'd gone to the parking lot on the roof, or she had left the supermarket. Putting it like that makes it sound simple—at least far easier than finding a dragon ball—but, even so, finding her was nearly impossible. I could eliminate a few options if I knew what she was shopping for, but alas.

Rather, why was she buying donuts at Yokado in the first place? Had she run away from school...? No, none of that mattered. I was just gifted with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so instead of working my brain for these futilities I should rather take bold yet meticulously-calculated actions.

But how?

How was I to find her?

For starters, I ran around the shop. I made no deductions or guesses and left it to where my nose took me. But I wasn't a dog. I was, obviously, a normal human being. I seriously considered broadcasting a message. 'We have been informed of a lost child...'

Aah, fuck. I knew running around at random was useless, and yet I was so pathetic I had no other option. But keeping at it would exhaust all my energy so I took the escalator up to the second floor. Even there, I couldn't spot Ketouin Yuika inside the crowd. Fucking damnit, and I knew she was close too. Aaah, so frustrating...what could I do?

There were two elevators next to the escalator. *Take this!* I punched the nearest elevator's red door. A small kid wearing a white cap stared at me.

The elevator's door opened.

Ketouin Yuika was inside.

My prayers were answered.

God exists.

9

"Don't move."

It was a man's voice. It was a lean voice that carried strangely well. It sounded just like when, in middle school, a boy shouted inside the Yubari coal mines they were visiting as a school trip. *Huh? Why am I remembering that old stuff? Is that what people see before they die? How ill-omened.*

"Don't move."

The man put the knife against Asumi's neck and repeated himself. She wanted to say he was using so much strength she couldn't move even if she wanted to, but he was crushing her throat, blocking words from coming out. Her heart rate increased. She started hearing the veins behind her ear pulsating.

"And don't think of fighting back, okay?"

Of course. I have no intention of doing that. I don't mind partaking in fights I have no chances of winning, but I'd rather avoid those where I have nothing to gain...plus I'm too scared to move.

"Can you speak?" the man asked. "You get we can't stay here for too long, don't you? Hurry up and answer."

"I..." she forced the words out of her mouth. "I can...t..."

"Huh?" the man asked back. He seemed irritated.

"It hurts..."

"Oh," he relaxed his grip. The pain somewhat lessened. "My apologies." He then asked again. "So, are you willing to speak?"

Asumi answered with many small nods.

"If you can speak then say it."

"I...I c-can speak."

Asumi used all her might to control her trembling tongue and eked those words out.

“Great. Then let’s not waste time, here’s a question,” the man interrogated her in a hush voice. “You… What can you see?”

“See?”

“Don’t move.”

A frighteningly glacial voice echoed from behind Asumi and the man.

The pressure in the muscles of the man’s neck indicated to her he was trying to turn around.

“Oh? I think I told you not to move, or could you not hear me?” *Clink*, she heard a sound like someone removed the cap on a Zippo. Asumi felt the man’s muscles stiffening. “Being incapable of listening is a sin. Meaning I don’t need to treat you with the bare minimum of empathy,” she heard footsteps closer and closer. They seemed to be going around them.

The person who appeared before her was Hiroyuki.

Pointing his gun their way.

“Yo,” he glanced at Asumi and voiced a casual greeting. One as smooth as if he’d just spotted a friend on the street. “You seem to be having some trouble, huh. I told you, didn’t it? I’m Popeye with spinach. Which would make you Olive, I guess? And,” he gave the man a carefree look, “you are Bluto.”

“You’re…that Ketouin kid.”

It was faint, but Asumi noticed the man’s voice panicking.

“And you are Ootsuki-san, aren’t you?” On the other hand, Hiroyuki was as confident as one can be. So much it wouldn’t feel out of place for him to start whistling. “I wondered what you could be doing after running away from us, but really, bullying girls?”

“…Hah hah. You’re the last person I’d want to hear that from.”

The man forced himself to laugh.

“Heh, acting like you’re an outsider? Did you forget you used to play a role in that too?”

Hiroyuki took a step forward.

"Don't come any closer," the man gripped his knife stronger. "I might have assisted you guys at one point, but that was merely my job. Deep down I—"

"I hope you're not going to say you didn't want to do it."

"Huh?"

"If you didn't want to, you could have not done it. 'I had no choice, it was work'... To my eyes, that's a shallow attempt at justifying your own actions. Right, justifying."

"What do you want to get at?"

"You don't understand? You want it too, don't you? That's why you ran away with the list; to monopolize it for yourself."

His grip on Asumi loosened.

"You look surprised that I know that. You were pretty crafty, I admit. After all—though this happened before I had any involvement with this project so I can't speak in detail—you managed to fool my grandfather. Well, only for a time. Moreover, you can solve most problems with time alone. Even Kindaichi Kosuke needed the help of time to resolve his last case. Err, what was it again, the something on the Hospital Hill..."

"Do the others know that I stole the list?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

Hiroyuki chuckled.

The man's grip was basically non-existent.

Asumi lowered her gaze.

She could see the knife.

...Aah.

As she'd imagined. The knife pressed against Asumi's neck was the kind Rambo might use, a thick survival knife. Not Jack the Stabber's favorite, the mundane one lacking in any style.

Which meant...this man wasn't Jack the Stabber.

“Are you going to report me to them?” the man asked. Usually one would need to be afraid to ask something like this.

“I couldn’t care less about your life of philosophy. I’ll turn a blind eye this time if you release this girl. Now, go on, someone might come in any—”

“Why are you covering for her?”

“Because she is not who you are looking for. She’s an acquaintance of mine, not Jack the Stabber.”

Huh? Jack the Stabber?

“An acquaintance?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any proof? Aren’t you rather trying to steal my target?”

“I mean…” Hiroyuki swayed his gun to the sides to emphasize its existence. “Do you really have the choice?”

“I have a trump card. One that could expose you guys’ crimes.”

The man released Asumi and pushed her towards Hiroyuki. So strongly she stumbled. *Geez, treating people like objects…*

“Hoh,” Hiroyuki caught Asumi with one hand. The gun remained pointed at the man. “I don’t remember having given you an opening, though,” he said and hid Asumi behind her back.

Asumi confirmed the man’s appearance from behind Hiroyuki’s back. He was a middle-aged man with a healthy body but a pathetic face. Surprising.

“Depending on your answer I wouldn’t be against handing you that card, you know?”

The man did his best to keep up a front. It was a sorry sight.

“A card…I’m guessing it’s just that tape, isn’t it?”

“…Ho—” the man opened his eyes wide. His mouth ajar. “How do you even know about—”

“We know you filmed the most recent *ritual* we held. You used Sasaki-san, didn’t you? We’ve already taken measures. How about delivering it to the police and seeing for yourself how it goes?”

The man seemed on the verge of tears.

“You’re already finished. So please, disappear from my sight.”

“...Shit!”

The man ran off.

“That guy’s as hopeless as ever. He just never learns,” Hiroyuki put his gun away. He then turned around to Asumi. With a smile. “Were you okay? Did he do anything weird?”

“No... Thank you.”

Asumi eked the words out.

“We should better get away, and fast.”

“Um, what was that man’s deal?”

Asumi was trying to stabilize her breathing. It didn’t go well, though. Her breathing was still rough.

“Oh, him? He’s a poor guy,” Hiroyuki said, glancing at the corpse on the sofa. “Or...a blissful ignoramus who doesn’t have the slightest clue about his son handing us the tape he thought was his trump card.”

———

Jack the Stabber, who had hid inside the toilet across the resting area right after murdering the girl, intentionaly forced a troubled expression onto their face to inform themselves they were confused. Unfortunately, that was the only way they had to focus their thoughts.

Asumi and the young man they’d seen at Building F walked out of the area.

Now, two problems had emerged.

Just earlier...I spotted Ootsuki, a man infamous—at least to me—for his stupidity. He seems to be looking for me. But that guy is incompetent. Therefore, his case can be ignored without much worry.

There was another, more important problem they couldn’t ignore:

Asumi.

...It’s certain.

Their suspicion evolved into a conviction.

Asumi had a way to somehow know about their crimes in real time. But what could it be? The question still unanswered, Jack the Stabber put it on hold. They realized they were growing more tolerant. Their past self wouldn't have allowed for that question to be put on hold.

Jack the Stabber filled their gaze with bloodthirst to inform themselves of their murderous intent.

10

Ketouin Yuika passed through the arcade, carrying her bag of donuts against her chest. There should only be toilets beyond that point, though... I followed her, careful not to be noticed. My heart was shared by a hunter's instinct and a young man's pure love for love.

Ketouin Yuika was walking down the hallway at a calm (well, you could simply call it dull) pace, her hair fluttering. There were less and less people around us. The ruckus lessened. I doubled in caution and in vigilance.

With dull yet confident steps, Ketouin Yuika continued down the hallway to the side opposite to the toilets. I followed her, keeping a reasonable distance between us. I then spotted a plate indicating this was a rest area. There was a red arrow under it. And sure enough, there was a corner next to it. Huh...I didn't know such a spot existed. Did she want to eat her donuts there?

However, Ketouin Yuika, still at that corner, had stopped moving altogether. She then quickly—relative to her norm—turned on her heels and walked in my direction at a quick pace—relative to her usual one.

Crap... Had she spotted me? I imagined the worst case. I had to hurry up and act like a stranger...wait, I *was* a stranger to her.

Even as my head was working despite its few loose screws, Ketouin Yuika was steadily making her way towards me. I was insanely tense (this tension was due to the latter of the two emotions sharing my heart I mentioned

earlier overwhelming me). My mind was in chaos. There were only 30 centimeters left between Ketouin Yuika and me.

Her still, vacant expression she was wearing like a Noh mask was right before my eyes. Her eyes as mellow as an herbivore's were looking at me.

There was no doubt she had some business with me.

Ketouin Yuika then did something I could never have seen coming.

She buried her face in my chest.

My thoughts crashed into a wall.

My blood ran counterflow.

I started sweating cold sweat.

My nose was teased with the scent from the donuts and from Ketouin Yuika.

My heart, pushed by confusion, excitement, and some fear, was pounding away with no survival instinct.

Hey hey hey, what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck? Are girls this proactive these days? But proactive or not, burying your face in the chest of whatever person you found behind you is simply abnormal. That's a pervert's behavior. Was Ketouin Yuika a pervert?

As I was being overwhelmed by my thoughts, I saw a man come out of the rest area. An older guy wearing casual clothes. He was haggard and had the expression of a loser in life. Despite having a healthy body. He had a poor balance in looks.

The man glanced at us with his loser's eyes and passed by us without paying too much attention. Ketouin Yuika was watching the man leaving down the hall from my chest. Did she want to avoid him? Don't tell me...had her parents found out she was skipping school and sent employees to go look for her? So she would be using me as camouflage?

Ketouin Yuika waited for the man to completely disappear from our sights to raise her face.

She then met my gaze.

I unfortunately got flustered.

"I'm sorry."

Ketouin Yuika apologized in a surprisingly small voice. The kind of voice that would get overshadowed by a squirrel sneezing.

"Eh, err..."

I was at a loss. I had no idea what to reply. 'Err, you too.' ...Definitely not. 'The pleasure was mine.' ...So vulgar. 'Thanks for the meal.' ...Just obscene.

Ketouin Yuika lowered her expressionless face and started going back the way she came. The distance between us that had been reduced to zero centimeters was growing again. One meter, two meters...

Crap.

This was bad.

What to do. No, I had no time to think. I had to quickly catch up to her and stop her. Was I going to waste the perfect occasion? Anything was fine...even improvising was better than nothing. Plus, she'd seen my face. Now, hurry, quick...

Entrapped by malicious hesitations, I saw Ketouin Yuika running back towards me. What had taken her over? Did she decide on eating the donuts in the rest space after all?

No...clearly not. The spineless-looking man from earlier appeared behind Ketouin Yuika and was following her with a stern expression. We're talking about that dull girl, she probably got spotted on her way. The distance between Ketouin Yuika and the man was shrinking visibly. No wonder, Ketouin Yuika's running speed was similar to that of a tortoise with a broken right leg. But in a hurry or not, none of that appeared on her face.

I took deep breaths.

...Alright.

This was my last chance.

I told myself that.

I brainwashed myself, telling myself I would never get another occasion like that if I let this one slip. That method could create idiots just like it could

create heroes. That's how powerful brainwashing is. I was simply making good use out of it.

These two were about one meter apart. And they were roughly three meters away from me.

The man's attention was entirely focused towards Ketouin Yuika so he paid no heed to me.

I prepared myself.

Estimating the distance,

Aligning my aim,

Waiting for the right moment,

And jumped.

Drop dead!

"Guh."

I nailed a dropkick on the man's unguarded chest. But I wasn't an expert in martial arts and didn't put enough weight on my right leg, so the kick was ultimately half-hearted. The man was pressing against his chest in pain, but he didn't fall over. Tsk, he was tougher than he looked. Or maybe I was just weak. Probably both.

Since my surprise attack proved ineffective, my only option left was scamping away. I grabbed Ketouin Yuika's hand. Her slender and cold hand. She didn't put up any resistance.

"We're running."

I told her in a tiny yet firm voice. I then pulled on her arm and ran. But Ketouin Yuika's pace was so hellishly slow we were left with a fifth of my usual running speed. A fifth is always a marvelous number, no matter the circumstances.

I heard the man growing in pain behind us. I got curious and looked back; he was already going after us. Crap…no matter how you crunch the numbers, he was bound to catch up to us.

By the time Ketouin Yuika and I were in front of the arcade, the man was a mere ten meters away from us.

“Excuse…” I said and carried Ketouin Yuika on my back. She was far lighter than the estimations I had in mind. “Be careful not to fall.” I then ran at full speed.

The other customers were looking at us but I paid no heed to that. The defunct eldest daughter often used to say, ‘If you have time to worry about other people’s gazes, you should first clean up your “place nobody looks at” you have inside yourself,’ and now, for a brief moment, I felt like I could understand what she meant by it.

I could feel Ketouin Yuika sighing near my ears. And her chest pressing against my back. It didn’t provoke any sexual urge in me, but even so my pure-hearted mind felt embarrassed. Men have a tendency to dispose of their lust using the word ‘pure-hearted.’ Useless thinking again.

Luckily, I reached the escalator just when an elevator opened next to us. Probably a kid playing around with it. A million thanks to them. I boarded it, Ketouin Yuika still on my back. Then I looked behind us. The man was running at us like a stoned rugbyman—with bloodshot eyes open wide as plates—at frightening speed. He was a few meters away.

I was scared shitless.

Even more so since I was born in a country where one rarely has to go through such frights.

I spammed the close door button as fast as Takahashi Meijin would.[26] The door immediately closed. We were invincible inside this square barrier.

A close call.

“…Phew,” I let a sigh slip. “Say,” I let her down from my back in the descending box of metal while catching my breath, “why…why are you so damn slow?”

---

[26] Takahashi Meijin is a famous icon in the video game industry from the 80s, when he presented various video games on the TV every week and toured the country in caravans to organize gaming tournaments. He is most famous for his ‘16 shot,’ his ability to fire 16 times per second in games such as *Star Force*. He was—and still is—such a cult idol that he was made into the protagonist of the cult games *Adventure Island*, *Super Adventure Island*, the anime *Bug tte Honey*, and the movie *Game King*.

Ketouin Yuika slightly tilted her head to the side.

"Huh," I muttered while enjoying the feeling of falling down.

"Um."

"Eh? What?"

"I dropped my donuts..."

Ketouin Yuika, still hanging her head, said in a tiny voice.

"Hey, what's that guy's deal? You aren't playing tag, are you? You didn't seem to be any friendly either."

"He wants me."

Ketouin Yuika gave a brief answer without breaking her expression.

We reached the first floor.

The door opened.

A crowd appeared before us. Amongst them...it's okay, I couldn't see that man.

"Come on, let's hurry," I pulled Ketouin Yuika's hand out of the elevator. "If we're not quick we'll go back to the Roadrunner-Wile E. Coyote situation again."

Ketouin Yuika pointed at the escalator.

"Eh?"

I looked up. The man was rushing down the escalator. Our eyes met. Bloodshot eyes. Serious eyes. A spineless-looking guy like him managing to make such a face would flabbergast anyone.

"So obstinate...does he think he's Zenigata or what?[27]"

I returned to carrying Ketouin Yuika on my back and dashed to the front parking lot. The man pursued us, resolute. Aah, geez, this is why I hate obstinate people.

We finally escaped the Yokado. Back into the scorching heat. I had parked my car near the entrance. That was proof I had good karma. I turned around

[27] Zenigata Koichi, Lupin III's arch rival.

and checked the entrance. The man was nowhere to be seen. I unlocked my car.

"Hey, could you hurry a bit..." I said to Ketouin Yuika. "How long are you gonna stay on my back?"

11

I was driving at full speed on a countryside road. Ketouin Yuika, in the passenger seat, looked ahead in silence, not even taking a glance behind us.

"Err...so, in short, you ran away from home."

Ketouin Yuika gave me a way-too-quiet *yes*.

"But how come? From your story you seem to be the daughter of a rich company, no?"

To my question, Ketouin Yuika answered, with much hesitation, that her family was insane.

"Ah, then nothing you can do about it."

I sided with her on the spot. Escaping from an insane family. For those who understand, it was a genuinely sorrowful cry. Grief from the fact one wasn't born in a normal family who would merely require good faith from them like a cult, and a sense of alienation for being the only one to feel that way. People who didn't come across either of these emotions during their infancies were likely able to acclimatize to their family situations.

"Ultimately no one but yourself can draw the line on who's crazy or not, but since nobody is truly unable to believe in themselves, everyone tends to come to the conclusion that others are crazy instead."

Ketouin Yuika's eyes were looking straight ahead the whole time.

"...Say," I asked, the steering wheel in hands. "Do you have a place to stay in mind?"

Ketouin Yuika shook her head.

"But don't you have relatives or friends..."

When I had said that much, she answered in a voice reminiscent of a cricket's footsteps that her relatives had been probably informed of her situation and that she didn't have any friends.

"So what was your plan?"

Ketouin Yuika lowered her herbivore-like eyes a bit and froze like a puppet...she wasn't the easiest of the bunch to talk with.

"You should better stay away from hotels," I glanced at the rearview mirror. "They'd find you in a heartbeat."

She didn't answer.

I was pressed by moderate tension and an amazing sense of urgency. It was fundamentally different from the childlike blissfulness one feels when conversing with their loved ones, but questioning my feelings would be most foolish. After all...at this point I could assert it: I was in love with Ketouin Yuika.

However, I wasn't completely blinded by love.

I hadn't forgotten to prepare my stun gun.

I never lost sight of my final objective. Otherwise I would feel too ashamed regarding Sana.

The zigzags and hills in the road were steadily getting rarer and gentler. We were entering the real countryside. The weather was great. The car was doing fine. I had plenty of gas. I felt like we could go anywhere. Though that was a delusion.

I spotted a small shop on the side of the road. Assuming there wouldn't be any more stores ahead for a good while, I parked in front of it.

"Hold on a minute."

I told Ketouin Yuika that and left the car. The shop was filled with snacks that could be stored for a long time, bread, and juice. No lunch boxes at all. Was it even trying to stay afloat? I bought bread for two people, a bottle of oolong tea, and decolored paper cups that looked like they hadn't left the shelf in at least six years, then returned to the car.

Back onto the road. The further we got, the denser the forest and the wider the fields became. Cities were so packed. It doesn't take long to find yourself in the countryside.

We kept silent in the car. If I had a car stereo I could at least play some Pre-School or DMBQ[28] to get rid of the silence (superficially, but it's still something), however, my car was unfortunately too barebone for that.

"Hey," I asked her to erase the silence from the car and the uncertainty from my head, "aren't you going to ask me anything?"

Ketouin Yuika faintly turned to me.

"Aren't you concerned about who I am or where I'm taking you?"

Ketouin Yuika looked down and said I didn't look evil.

I felt my heart bouncing in my chest like a kid.

12

"...Why did that man think I was Jack the Stabber?" It took until she left Yokado and came out in the back parking lot for Asumi to have finally calmed down enough to ask questions. "Was he tailing me?"

"One question at a time," Hiroyuki laughed, walking by her side. He was wearing a Hysteric Glamour shirt today again. "I imagine he entered that rest area by pure coincidence."

"By coincidence..."

"Exactly. He entered that space and saw a corpse stabbed in the neck by a knife with only one other person next to it. Moreover, they weren't even looking at the corpse, they were trying to buy juice from the vending machine." Hiroyuki used his soles to scrap the scribbles kids had drawn in the parking lot while walking. "If someone saw that...really anyone, they would come to that conclusion: 'This girl is Jack the Stabber.'"

"How do you know about the juice?"

---

[28] Pre-School and Dynamite Masters Blues Quartet, two Japanese rock bands from the 90s'.

“Sheer intuition. Since you’re used to corpses.”

“How rude.”

Asumi eyes formed a glare. But she didn’t look into his eyes. After all, that was the truth.

“Don’t be angry with me. Ah, I’ll buy you some juice as an apology,” Hiroyuki pointed at the vending machines aligned along Yokado’s walls with his jaw. “You’re thirsty, right? Are you okay with Fanta? A lemon one?”

“No thanks,” Asumi turned him down. “More importantly, tell me about the man who assaulted me.”

“I told you, he’s a poor guy.”

“I’m not asking that way…”

“Anything more would be a trade secret.”

“Don’t you…” Asumi asked something bold. “Don’t you actually know something more about the Jack the Stabber Case?”

Hiroyuki glanced at Asumi with a perplexing smile.

“I mean…” she couldn’t end her question there. “You seem to have been searching for them for a long time, and…and you two were talking about stealing Jack the Stabber from the other, weren’t you?”

“Calm down.”

“I am calm.”

“Didn’t you think of a more relevant question?”

“Like what?”

“Why did Jack the Stabber, contrary to their norm, choose a spot as risky as they can be to murder that girl? Doesn’t that bother you?”

“It did, but…”

Asumi had found the situation too hazardous for the otherwise-prudent Jack the Stabber since even before they had murdered anyone. They had nothing to gain from killing in a supermarket—neither in merit nor in meaning. They should have simply done it somewhere deserted like usual. So why had they changed their modus operandi now of all times?

“Finally,” Hiroyuki spotted his sport motorcycle and jogged over to it. “What do you think? Isn’t it cool? It’s a Kawasaki *and* the muffler is entirely made out of titanium. Oh, want me to drive you home?”

“No thanks.”

“Let’s get back on topic since you’re so cold. We don’t know why Jack the Stabber chose this supermarket. There wasn’t anything to gain, and it was way too dangerous.”

Hiroyuki presented what Asumi was thinking.

“Exactly. Why would they do something as arduous as murder in—”

“Arduous? Murders are way more simple than you seem to think, you know,” Hiroyuki said casually.

“Is it?”

“It’s no different in essence than crushing a mosquito or eating pork meat.”

“Are you generalizing?”

“I’m making a good point,” Hiroyuki answered on the spot before riding his bike. “Well, murders are simple at their core, but they can indeed be quite arduous to put in practice. After all, you will get arrested if someone finds you. In addition, you might find yourself killed in return under the splendid pretense of a death sentence.”

“Are you against death sentences?”

Asumi wiped off the sweat from her forehead.

“Well, we’re talking about human lives. It’s absurd to reduce the debate to simply being for or against it.”

“I think so too.”

She could agree to that.

“Say…did you hear that story of the husband whose wife and kids were killed that expressed his regrets when his death sentence demand for the culprit was rejected?” Hiroyuki, seated on his bike, raised the corners of his mouth. “That’s disheartening. The same guy who extolled life’s value demanded the culprit’s execution. Hear that? So what, does the culprit’s life

have no value? And even letting that slide, that would totally be an indirect murder."

"But people who commit murders are not sane."

"So you're saying murderers are abnormal?"

"I am."

"The consensus on murder changes depending on the place, the era, and the society it was committed in. If you maintain that murders are proof of one's abnormal mental state, then you're also arguing that Oda Nobunaga, Napoleon, and America's presidents as well as Japan's emperors in history are lunatics."

Hiroyuki sounded like he was testing her.

"That's not my point, my definition of abnormal refers to...to the people who commit murder for stupid reasons."

"Stupid reasons? Such as, concretely?"

"Err, well, like for their enjoyment..."

The words came out of her mouth in a jumbled mess.

"Heh," unwavering, Hiroyuki launched his attack. "Then, if I follow you right, those who kill for fun are lunatics and shouldn't ever be forgiven, but those who kill by greed or fanaticism are still within the bounds of forgiveness?"

"No, I simply think that killing for stupid reasons is—"

"How do you define those 'stupid reasons' you love so much you keep repeating?" Hiroyuki persisted. "You need to explain what exactly falls into that category and what doesn't."

"Err..."

"Having someone you don't like commit seppuku, killing someone because they believe in a different God, invading a city because you want their territory—you can't really call these reasons reasonable, can you?"

"..."

She couldn't find the words. She lowered her eyes onto the parking lot's asphalt in search of them. But, of course, the answer Asumi was looking for wasn't written in the children's scribbles at her feet, so she stayed silent.

"You see, there's no definition."

"None?"

"A murder is a murder. One might be afflicted with a mental illness, be doing it to avenge their murdered little sister, or slay an enemy of Christianism on the battlefield, but all of those are equally *murders*," Hiroyuki answered calmly. "There is no difference."

"...So you're saying the reasons or ideologies behind it don't matter and all murders are equal in weight and meaning?"

"Well, basically. Keep in mind that's merely my personal view, though," Hiroyuki nodded. "Let's go back to the topic. We went on a heck of a tangent, huh."

"The topic?"

Asumi looked at the sun reflecting onto the bike.

"We were talking about why Jack the Stabber chose to murder in this supermarket, weren't we?" Hiroyuki put his hands around the bike's handle. "Did you forget?"

"I didn't."

"Let's assume there's a solid reason to it," Hiroyuki looked at Asumi and put up a faint smile. "If there's not, who would be stupid enough to do it there? Someone walking in would mean a ticket to jail for them. So what was there to gain for Jack the Stabber worth taking on that risk?"

"...Did you figure it out?"

"It's merely guesswork, but yes."

"I don't mind. Please."

Asumi prompted him.

"If my thinking is correct, you are in danger. In quite the predicament, actually."

"What?"

How am I in danger?

"I'm guessing... Jack the Stabber found it strange. That you appeared right after they committed a murder. I mean, isn't that what happened? Twice over, Jack the Stabber killed someone in Building F, and both times you rushed to the scene."

"Wait, but that's a mere two times. They should think it's a coincidence—"

"And they murdered in this supermarket to investigate whether it really was a coincidence," Hiroyuki declared like a loquacious detective. "They were probably tailing you. And when they saw you enter Yokado, they suddenly got an idea: If I kill someone now and she shows a reaction... it will be bingo."

"Bingo?"

"You reacted and headed to the crime scene. Even if they don't know that you were sharing their vision, they should now be positive that you have a way to observe their crimes."

Oh no...that sounds possible.

"Naturally, that would propel you to the top of their list of nuisances. Congrats. Jack the Stabber will surely try to eliminate you now. As soon as possible, even."

Ahh, how could this happen.

Asumi felt shivers despite the heat.

"What can I do..."

He will come.

With overt bloodthirst.

He will kill me.

He will kill me.

He will murder me.

No, hold on.

Let's think more optimistically...no, more positively.

I will finally get to see him.

So if I can turn the tables, I will be able to achieve my goal.

Touko's revenge.

Recovering my mental state.

Also...

Err,

What again?

"Want me to drive you home?"

13

I took a forest path to avoid the violent heat. The tall trees planted outside of the line of fine gravel we were driving on were intimidating. The breeze coming in through the open window and the filtered sunlight were refreshing.

I had no destination in mind. I didn't know what I was doing. I was simply driving at random. It was soon time to make a decision and do something. I knew that, I knew.

"Do you want to go home?"

Ketouin Yuika shook her head at my question. She was looking at the scenery with her peaceful and listless eyes. Still wearing her expression so lacking in emotions even the deceased seemed more expressive.

"I don't wanna go home either," I muttered while feeling the pleasant staggerings of the road. "I mean...it's not like we can at this point. Not at home, nor anywhere."

No answer.

I looked to my side on a whim and spotted something shiny, reflecting the sunrays. It was sparkling and beautiful. That was water...a brook.

I parked my car on the side of the road. I grabbed the bag containing the bread, oolong tea, and paper cups that I'd thrown onto the back seat, and addressed Ketouin Yuika who was sitting still in the passenger seat.

"Let's eat lunch over there."

Ketouin Yuika gave me a nod.

The brook was so modest I expected noodles to flow downstream at any moment, but in spite of that, it did a great job at reflecting the sun and overall laid there proudly.

We sat next to it.

The brook's stream.

The voices of bugs.

The radiance of the sun.

It was…quite peaceful.

"Is it hot?"

Ketouin Yuika answered me in her small voice that it was just a little.

"Here."

I took out the sweet bread and handed it to Ketouin Yuika.

She bowed her head deeply before accepting it. However, she didn't eat it. She merely stared at the bag in wonder.

I took a bite of my preservative-filled bread. It didn't taste like preservatives. I then poured myself a cup of the oolong tea that had become lukewarm and drank it.

"…Aren't you gonna eat?"

I was intrigued by Ketouin Yuika's total lack of movement.

"How do I open it?"

"…"

I opened her bag. I couldn't believe it. Just how privileged was she?

"Here you go."

I gave her the bread I'd taken out of the bag. But Ketouin Yuika didn't try to eat it. What was it now? Don't tell me she wanted me to feed her. Not like I would complain.

"Aren't you gonna eat?"

"I am not fond of bread," her voice was seriously small. "It's too dry."

"And yet donuts are fine?"

She answered that those were for her little brother.

"Huh."

I was slightly taken aback. Ootsuki's notes had no mentions of that. When it had all these other useless details.

"You see…I had a little sister. She was bright and pretty, I couldn't dream for a better one," I'd started speaking before I knew it. Why? To repent? Me? But why? "Of course she was a real beauty. But she died and…ah, no, no, I can't," my reason cut short to my story. It cut Sana's existence short. "I really can't. Ahhh…sorry for that."

"Do you still love your deceased sister?" Ketouin Yuika asked me all of a sudden.

"Of course I do," I gave her a firm nod. "I love her."

Ketouin Yuika didn't show any reaction to my words, she simply reverted her gaze to the brook. Following her lead, I also looked at it. The sky was absorbing the light reflecting on the water.

The sun, the brook, the verdant grass—everything was sparkling and beautiful.

They were glittering.

Shining.

Absolutely everything.

Again and again. That formed the world.

That shining alone created the world.

That's how this peaceful afternoon felt.

Sparkling.

Like a picnic.

With Ketouin Yuika by my side.

A flicker.

It was my first time feeling reluctant to return to reality.

"It really makes you not want to go back."

I expressed my thoughts through words to fight back as trivially as I could.

"It really does," Ketouin Yuika said.

“But we still have to go back, in the end…” I sprawled onto the grass. It was comfortable. “*Sigh*.” Fuck, look at that, the sky is spreading out to no end like an American territorry.

“We don’t really need to go back, do we?”

Despite the chirping and bug sounds almost erasing her voice, I’m positive that’s what Ketouin Yuika said.

“Eh?” I asked back, but Ketouin Yuika didn’t say anything.

I stared at her.

Her long hair swaying in the wind was beautiful.

Her moist pupils absorbing the surrounding light were beautiful.

As I thought, I was in love with her.

I stood up.

“No…we must,” I answered while brushing my back. “I will still choose to perceive reality with my own eyes.”

Right. I was a realist. I had decided that just now.

“What is reality?” Ketouin Yuika looked a bit in my direction.

“Beats me…no idea,” I’d never thought about it. “Well, I’m sure it’s not that big of a deal.”

Ketouin Yuika said she agreed then put up a faint smile…at least it seemed like one to me.

“You said your family was insane earlier. What did you mean by that?”

“I meant it literally,” she wasn’t perturbed at my sudden question and answered calmly.

“No, but more concretely…”

“Do you believe what I said?” Ketouin Yuika asked.

“Well, yeah I do,” I answered after thinking for a bit.

“Please don’t laugh…”

I then learned everything.

14

After keeping a pace no sane person would drive at for the whole duration, the bike finally stopped in front of Asumi's apartment.

"...I thought I was a goner," Asumi commented as soon as she removed her helmet.

"Don't die on me," Hiroyuki answered her deadpan.

"W-why don't you respect the speed limitations?" She was gasping for oxygen. "You're bound to get into an accident one day if you keep driving like that."

"Will you pay me a visit when that comes to pass?"

"In your dreams."

"You sure get angry easily..." Hiroyuki said, a strained smile on his face. "It shortens your lifespan so you should try not to."

"*You're* the one making me angry."

Asumi got off the bike. Her legs were wobbly.

"My, are you okay?."

"I am perfectly fine!"

"Women are scary, eh," Hiroyuki shrugged. "I'm taking my leave then," he said before putting on the helmet Asumi had been wearing. "Listen, contact me immediately at the slightest thing," he said with his muffled voice then revved his engine and left.

He had saved her life and was reliable, but Asumi still couldn't come to like him. She couldn't put her finger on the reason, but his every word and action got on her nerves. *Well...it's probably a matter of compatibility.*

...Ah.

Asumi remembered.

Shoot.

She had completely forgotten something important.

...Kimihiko-kun.

She finally remembered she had dashed away in the middle of her date. *That was horrible of me when he had finally cheered up... Plus, he definitely thinks*

I'm a weirdo now. How can I solve this misunderstanding...no, first, I must apologize. Asumi took out her phone from her bag.

She searched for Kimihiko's number. *Where could he be right now? I doubt he stayed in the coffee shop, diligently waiting for me. Did he search for me inside Yokado? No, then he would have just called me...*

She heard footsteps coming from behind.

She felt someone approaching her.

"Hi."

"Eh..."

Right when Asumi tried to turn back,

Something coursed through her entire body.

She felt a metallic shock.

That shock assaulted her a few times.

It hurts.

It stings.

Asumi's fading consciousness remembered the symptoms she experienced when she had been stung by a jellyfish as a kid. She was confronted with the same type of shock.

...Electricity?

She collapsed on the spot.

Her mind got blurry.

I need to hurry and call Kimihiko...

Just when she'd managed to reach for her phone on the ground, Asumi lost consciousness.

15

The sun had completely set.

An evil moon was rising in the sky.

It was still scorching hot outside.

Ketouin Yuika and I were in a park, sitting on swings arranged like a couple, as if we were a couple. The bugs' cries and the delinquents' bikes were noisy, but even so, that space enshrouded with darkness created a surprising sense of stillness and was quite comfortable. How should I put it...it was as though the park at night got a new playground equipment called silence. I had to take off my hat to that.

"...So are you going home?"

I, now feeling like I knew everything, looked at Ketouin Yuika next to me. Her gloomy eyes were directed at the pure-black sky.

*It must be tough...*I felt some sympathy for her.

This girl was a victim too.

I had listened to her story.

Ketouin Yuika answered in a voice tinier than a mouse's coughs that she didn't want to, then pressed a hand against her stomach.

"...Do you want to run away?"

Needless to say, there wasn't an ounce of sarcasm in my words. Saying it just in case.

Silence.

She didn't speak.

I stood up from the swing and walked towards the open space in front of us. After about 30 steps, I turned back. Ketouin Yuika was still sitting on the swing.

I took deep breaths, replacing all the air in my lungs with new one.

I then cleared my head.

"Let's run away," I said to Ketouin Yuika. "At this point we might as well completely eclipse from here. What's wrong with running away? It's not like it's a sin or anything."

Ketouin Yuika seemed to have given my proposition an answer, but she was so far away and her voice was so faint I couldn't hear what she had said at all.

However, she then got off the swing and joined me.

She stood before me.
With a slight smile.
She was trusting me.
Ketouin Yuika was standing before me.
I pressed my stun gun against her stomach and switched it on.
I would end it.

Chapter 6

I Tried Putting the Pieces Together

1

The people of the Kagami family are armed with an *intuition*, though each to differing degrees.

...Something is off.

When I reached the hospital, my intuition was ringing.

...Something is off.

I couldn't answer if asked specifically what was off. It was a vague feeling that, unlike Ryouko's prophecies, couldn't help me pinpoint concrete dangers or their roots.

Being more cautious than ever, I parked my car deeper into the forest than usual. I glanced at Ketouin Yuika who was sleeping in the passenger seat. ...No problem, she was sound asleep and therefore not the cause of my bad feeling.

I grabbed my flashlight and headed for the hospital, leaving Ketouin Yuika behind in my car. I could always bring her to room 206 after checking that everything was safe.

On my way to the hospital, I erased the sound of my footsteps, questioned everything that entered my field of vision (not like I could see much outside of what the flashlight let me), and checked my surroundings more meticulously than ever before. However, I hadn't found anything by the time I reached it.

As I thought, this bad feeling...

Came from within the hospital.

I entered it and came out in the lobby. A cold atmosphere proper to buildings, graffitis on the walls, broken glass shards, and a worn-out sofa. Next, my hearing...the wind blowing and the darkness squirming around. Okay, nothing abnormal. I climbed the stairs while doing my best to make as little noise as possible.

I reached the second floor. My bad feeling hadn't stopped ringing. Rather, it increased in intensity. I pointed the flashlight's tiny light at the hallway.

Had the path to room 206 always been this long? My bad feeling was getting more and more alarming.

I walked down the hallway. The story wouldn't progress if I didn't. Even if the worst outcome was waiting for me.

After what felt like decades of walking, I finally reached room 206. The padlock was firmly in place. I had been fearing the situation where I forgot to lock it, so this was a big relief.

...Oh, right.

There was another point of concern. That was, of course, the hospital room I'd trapped Toudou Yumie's corpse in. I carefully inspected that door too. The padlock there was firmly in place as well. I should've actually checked on the corpse inside, but I didn't feel like it. I wasn't thrilled at the thought of seeing that crushed, swollen, and bloodied face.

In the end, I hadn't found any problem anywhere.

So where did this bad feeling come from?

I knew for sure I wasn't imagining it, but...

Despite being unable to clear my anxiousness away, I unlocked the door and entered room 206. I wanted to know how Mikuni Akiko was doing now that she was broken. And whether it was safe to have Ketouin Yuika sit next to her.

"I'm coming in."

I opened the door. The room was shrouded in darkness; I couldn't see anything.

That was most natural, but it was dark anyway.

I approached the lockers while holding my flashlight up.

Eh?

What could it be...

Something had reflected the flashlight's light.

That sparkling object was—

A knife.

Suddenly, something massive weighed on my body. It was so sudden and powerful I dropped to the floor, unable to fight back. Empty lunch boxes, plastic bottles, and crumpled tissues flew off. The flashlight escaped my hands and rolled past my head. It was shining in an unrelated direction.

The thing mounting me was wheezing.

It didn't have a shred of thought.

A starved hyena.

Breathing roughly.

Immensely powerful.

And thirsting for blood with all its might.

A beast.

That word popped into my mind.

The beast's groans didn't form human words.

In desperation, I swung both fists at the beast melting in the darkness. *Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh.* None landed.

"Tch."

Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain on my left arm.

A cut?

It hurt.

It hurt so fucking bad!

But the beast was only starting. The next pain was in my left flank.

A pain so fierce I had forgotten about the one in my left arm.

"Heeh!"

I was stabbed.

I was fucking stabbed.

You must be kidding me.

Eh?

It hurt!

"Aaah, aauuuuh!"

I screamed, unable to hold it in. It only made the pain worse. To express it in onomatopoeia, it was closer to a *splotch* than a *shiiiing*.

“Hah…haaaah, agh.” Fear and despair and questions ran amok in my brain. “Guh, goaaah.” I entrusted my fate to my instincts that were growing more powerful by the minute. “Hguh.” With my instincts baren, I slid my hands to the beast’s thighs and pushed its body away with all my strength. I felt pain coursing through my left arm.

I heard the beast ramming against the door.

I grabbed the flashlight close to my head on reflex and threw it as hard as I could at the beast.

A dull sound.

The beast shrieked.

The flashlight bounced back to my feet. A clean hit. I picked it up and stood up…or tried to, but the intense pain in my flank exploded and broke my knees. The wound seemed deeper than I’d thought.

Thinking about it, I had a hard time breathing.

I couldn’t muster much strength.

My lips were shaking despite the heat.

I might die.

Fuck.

Whatever…I could think about death all I wanted later. Memento mori, the fuck’s that?

Thinking about that crap seven seconds before dying is more than enough.

Might as well make the most of it while you’re alive.

I readied myself to handle the beast’s next attack.

Darkness.

Silence.

It must’ve been either wary or seriously injured as it didn’t launch any attack. It was merely groaning. Meaning I had to use this spare time to my advantage.

…What’s that thing?

I directed the flashlight at the beast.

A monster was crouching, a knife in hand.

…No.

Not at all.

That was—

Toudou Yumie.

With her swollen eye and the blood coming out of her mouth and nose she was reminiscent of those monsters that appear in B-splatter movies, but that was, without a shadow of a doubt, Toudou Yumie.

Toudou Yumie stared at me with the very concept of anger that had replaced her eyes. A dangerous glint. I pressed against my bleeding flank with my bleeding left arm, keeping the light on her disfigured face. What a gross face. Not a sight to behold. 'A monster' was the right word for it.

Still, her being alive came as a surprise to me. After I'd punched her so much. Geez…women really are tough, huh. But hadn't her breathing stopped… An apparent death? Heh, I guess anything goes now.

However,

However, there were still elements I couldn't explain.

Toudou Yumie's resurrection, sure, I could accept that.

But…how had she opened the padlock on the outside?

She couldn't have done that from inside the room. And it was properly locked. I had checked it wasn't defective.

…Had someone opened it for her?

But who? Don't tell me it was a random idiot who visited the hospital for frights.

Had they given her this knife?

Okay. Let's say that's what happened.

But what about the handcuffs? I had handcuffed Toudou Yumie's arms and legs.

I had kept the keys on me since.

And same for the padlock on room 206… It was locked when I had looked at it earlier.

So how had she entered the room?

And…how had she closed it again afterwards?

Huh? Mikuni Akiko…wasn't here.

Fuck!

She'd run away!

"Slash," Toudou Yumie muttered in a blurry voice due to her broken teeth and swollen cheeks, only her face spared from the ocean of darkness. "Slash…"

2

Asumi opened her eyes.

Despite the majority opinion being that it would be safer for her to keep them closed, she opened her eyes.

Her head hurt.

She felt shivers despite the heat.

Where am I?

It's so dark I can't see anything. The cold floor is painful. And, more importantly, the smell of mold and the humid air is killing me.

My body feels sluggish. Also I'm a bit sleepy.

Errr.

No.

That's not the priority.

…How did I end up here?

There was a hole in her memory.

I should have been on a date with Kimihiko today…huh, but why is Hiroyuki's face coming up? A stabbed knife…a connection? And a knife near my throat. A man. But Hiroyuki saved me, then he drove his bike way too fast… And when I got home someone called for me and electricity ran through my body. Electricity? But the jellyfish incident was so long ago…jellyfish? Oh, electricity, a shock…

Suddenly, a light emerged in the room previously dominated by darkness. It was a faint source compared to a lightbulb, but it was intense enough to

appear dazzling to Asumi, who'd stayed inside for a long time. Her gaze moved from the ceiling to the source of light, where she found a coleman lantern on the floor between two dirtied beds.

"You finally woke up?"

Behind the lamp, a familiar individual was leaning against the wall.

"...Ryouko-san."

"I'm impressed you could keep sleeping in here. It's already midnight. The day rolled over, you realize?"

Ryouko was wearing blue jeans and a single T-shirt, a casual getup for her. *Uh-huh...she prioritized ease of movement.*

"So you were Jack the Stabber," Asumi asked, still lying on the bed.

"Wow..." Ryouko put up a bright smile. She seemed to have really liked what Asumi had said. "That's amazing. You're just guessing that from context, aren't you? Really impressive, Asumi-chan."

Asumi tried to stand up. She thought staying down was even worse than showing her back to her enemy.

"Don't," she said in a stern tone. "Sorry but I want you to keep sleeping there. Like a baby. Of course, you can do that, can't you?"

"Then...let me rest on a bed."

"I wouldn't if I were you. You'll get cursed."

"You're Jack the Stabber, right?"

Asumi wanted an ultimate confirmation.

"Indeed."

Ryouko answered with a casual nod. Asumi found that exceedingly vexing. A sense of languish coming from the person she'd been desperately pursuing suddenly appearing before her one day. And...anger, for similar reasons.

"...Why, um, did you murder these 80 girls?"

"How rude, only 79."

"Eh?"

“Hey, before that, tell me, Asumi-chan. How did you keep track of my actions? You appeared on the scene right away when I killed Kuhara Misaki-chan too, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know who Kuhara Misaki is.”

“The girl I killed at Yokado,” Ryouko answered with a smile before repeating her question, asking how Asumi knew what she was doing.

“Where are we?”

“Even now I have a knife on me. Want to see it?”

“I want to know your motive for these murders. Why—”

“How did you know what I was doing?”

“Why did you kill them?”

“Don’t answer my question with questions,” Ryouko spoke in a voice more stern than Asumi had ever heard from her. “Did school teach you to answer interrogatives with interrogatives?”

Asumi told Ryouko that she could see visions when she was committing those murders.

“Is that a superpower?”

Ryouko reacted in an unexpected way.

That confused Asumi quite heavily.

“Oh, I knew it.” She pierced Asumi with a gaze full of a kind of naivety. “Wow, amazing! Yay,” her smile extended up to her ears. She was so enthusiastic she seemed like she would jump from her sitting position. She didn’t look like the legendary serial killer who had murdered 80 girls. Her impression threw Asumi off.

“U-um…is that really amazing?”

“You can see it, right?”

“Eh?”

“You can see me as I kill these girls, can’t you?”

Ryouko was grinning.

I’m scared.

She’s too scary.

“How do you...”

Asumi’s body, lying on the cold floor, was stiff like a metal plate. A faint layer of sweat had appeared on her face. But she couldn’t muster the courage to wipe it off. She was overwhelmed by her dire anxiety and the unpredictable situation.

“You see, Asumi-chan,” she said in a soft voice. When Ryouko spoke in a soft voice, that generally meant something bad was coming. It always had. “I can see even further.”

3

Round one ended with a pathetic loss for me, but I wasn’t gonna give up. She couldn’t catch me unaware anymore. I was on edge. Not even a tiger could ambush me right now.

However, I was heavily injured in my arm and flank while my opponent was armed. If she managed another attack on me, I would be dead for sure.

Blood wouldn’t stop flowing from me. Emptying me. I was breathing faster and faster despite not moving.

This situation wasn't fifty-fifty.

This room’s only source of light was in my hands. That flashlight was my only advantage. Right, just this fucking thing! This thing that also informs the opponent of my precise position.

It seemed like luck and God were on Toudou Yumie’s side this time.

No matter what happened, I wouldn’t win.

But I couldn’t afford to die.

That being said...I was totally gonna die, wasn’t I?

I started laughing to myself.

Unable to understand the intent behind that laugh, Toudou Yumie recoiled in fright for an instant before howling like a beast and commencing her attack.

Second round: Start.

Using only the flashlight's light as a reference, I backed up with all my might like a greenhorn matador and barely dodged her. Naturally, she didn't stop her attack there. Toudou Yumie aimed her knife precisely at my neck region. This bitch…she was trying to kill me in one strike?

Toudou Yumie kept swinging the knife at me while howling *DIIIIIIIIE*. Her swings were dull, but it was still incredibly hard to avoid them with my injuries.

She was cornering me, little by little.

…Hey, what?

Am I gonna die?

Am I gonna die?

Thinking about it, my clothes and especially my pants were strangely lukewarm. I kept praying the cause was any liquid but blood.

Perhaps aiming to settle this quickly, Toudou Yumie charged at me. Given the distance between us, it was impossible to avoid. So, what to do? How could someone bleeding out of their arm and stomach ward off this attack in this darkness?!

Time is cruel. Toudou Yumie and I were now at kissing distance. By chance, the flashlight shone onto the knife's tip that was headed straight for my stomach. Aaah, geez, what a farce to show someone that at the end of their life. …Then, I gave up on life.

However, I was lucky.

I stepped on some liquid which made me lose balance and fall over. Ouch, I hit my head on a bed's leg. But the pain was a millionth that of my stomach.

Toudou Yumie stopped moving. Maybe she was confused at my sudden disappearance. I grabbed her immobile ankles and pulled them towards me with all strength I could muster. Toudou Yumie raised a high-pitched, surprisingly feminine (well, she *was* a girl) scream and fell.

I used my convulsing left arm to raise my upper body and mercilessly slammed the flashlight in my right hand at Toudou Yumie's face.

First hit, a weird sensation. Second hit, a bizarre sensation. Third hit, a gross sensation.

Even I couldn't muster a fourth hit.

Every time the flashlight sunk into her face, Toudou Yumie raised a beast-like howl. You dumbfuck, *I* was the one in pain. Remember how you stabbed me...

Ah.

An eye for an eye. Hadn't I learned that in my social studies classes?

What a great idea.

I directed the flashlight at the ground and searched Toudou Yumie's vicinity. A dirtied long skirt. Empty lunch boxes. Dirtied legs. Empty plastic bottles. A dirtied shirt... Found it.

I picked up the knife and its deep-red blade.

I then stabbed it into Toudou Yumie's stomach.

Her skin was harder to pierce than I'd thought. Toudou Yumie's astounding howl echoed in the whole room. I paid no heed to her and stabbed deeper. Her howl got louder. A shriek. I pulled the knife out. Then back in. Again and again. Die I'll kill you Die I'll kill you Die.

Eventually,

Toudou Yumie stopped screaming.

And stopped moving.

I whacked her disfigured face with the flashlight just in case. It made a wet sound. Then its light turned off. Apparently the last shock had destroyed it completely.

Darkness enveloped me.

Then, the end.

I crawled to the lockers like an old man with broken bones. I held onto the handle and raised my upper body. My arm and stomach were in immense pain, as though they were being ripped apart. Cold sweat entered my eyes. I roamed my hands around, searching for candles, then lit one.

Room 206's darkness disappeared a bit.

Then I found myself flabbergasted. My shirt and pants were deep red. What the fuck, I wasn't the vocalist from Yura Yura Teikoku! Nor was I the Red Ranger. I tried cheering myself up with these jokes but to no avail.

Also...I hadn't noticed at all in the darkness, but my vision was extremely hazy, like there was a filter applied to my eyes. I felt super cold. I couldn't tell if my head felt heavy or light. A sponge made out of metal. I had lost a fair share of my stamina.

I had a coughing fit. I found blood on the hand I used to cover my mouth. ...Blood I'd coughed. Who was I, Masaoka Shiki?[29]

But jokes aside, I seriously felt in danger. The fear I'd forgotten was suddenly coming back to haunt me. I was really gonna die. ...Die?

The more I thought about it, the more painful my wounds got. Helped by the candle's light, I inspected them. The one on my arm wasn't that bad, but the one on my flank was beyond saving. It was shedding fresh blood like a fountain. My vision got even hazier. My mind felt vacant too...

Shit, I really can't afford to be dying.

No...it's just not yet the moment to die.

I touched my flank.

It hurt so insanely bad I had a hard time repressing my laughter.

See, it hurt, didn't it?

Pain is the proof one is alive.

Supressing my pain and my laughter, I looked around. As I thought, Mikuni Akiko wasn't in this room. Her handcuffs were on the floor.

Now, what to do next?

What?

"Aah, shit."

I heard a scream coming from the hallway.

---

[29] A Japanese poet and author from the late 19th century. He chose his pen name, Shiki, which can also be read 'Hototogisu' (a cuckoo legended to cough blood when it sings), to reflect the tuberculosis he had for most of his life that often made him cough blood.

4

"Mm? You heard that?" Ryouko glanced at the door. "I must be imagining it." But she lost interest almost immediately and reverted her gaze to Asumi.

"Can I get up now?"

"I told you no."

"It's giving me a headache."

"Suck it up, okay?"

"I can't—"

Ryouko finally took her knife out.

It was the mundane knife lacking in any style she had seen times and times again.

"Are you going to kill me too?"

Asumi swallowed her breath. Her lips were dry like a desert. She wanted some lip balm.

"Hmm, thing is, I haven't decided yet," that decision sounded as serious to her as deciding on what to visit during a school trip. "You're a danger to me, so at first I wanted to eliminate you as soon as possible. But then I revised that idea. After all, you're innocent in this affair, Asumi-chan."

"What a thing to say after killing 80 innocent girls..."

"Oh my, you awakened to your inner justice or something?" Ryouko was cheerful. "I'm sorry for that, then."

"...That's not how I meant it," Asumi replied.

"I bet. After all, there's nothing more threatening than a sense of justice," Ryouko spun her knife with great deftness. She was used to it. "I can really empathize, having experienced it first-hand."

Asumi thought of responding that only people who feel remorse in their actions find justice threatening, but she was too afraid to say it.

"Are you scared?"

"How could I not be?"

And, in fact, Asumi's voice was shaking.

“Why are you scared? I’m the same as always.”

A beaming smile. Asumi was convinced. That the emotion she’d felt towards this person had been alertness, not just incompatibility.

“Gee, don’t make such a scary face… Try putting up a smile like Sakura-chan. And if you believe you’ll definitely come out alright or something, then you will.”

“Huh?”

“If you’re that frightened, let me ask you an interesting quiz. That should calm you down,” Ryouko said and put down her knife next to her.

“…A quiz?”

What is she talking about?

“A-kun and B-san were going full speed on the highway of love,” Ryouko started telling her story anyway. For some reason her tone got more formal when she took on the role of quiz giver. “One fine day, they went on a date at Lake Shikotsu.”

“Having a date at a lake is outdated,” Asumi told her, making herself realize she was still somewhat composed.

“Generation gap, eh,” Ryouko answered on the spot. “There, B-san found a wharf. She said she wanted to board a boat. A-kun gave his approval. They sat on one boat, facing each other. A moment of bliss for both. However…behold, this lake was home to cannibal mermen.”

“What?”

The heck?

“Moreover, their boat overturned in the middle of the lake. They were thrown into the water. A-kun managed to return the boat to normal, but B-san was still in the water. Exactly, B-san couldn’t swim. …Well, not like I can swim either.”

Ryouko suddenly inserted a personal comment.

“So that’s why you always stayed on the beach?”

Asumi played back her memories in her head.

“My, that’s some nostalgic stuff you’re bringing up. Which reminds me, you were a great swimmer, weren’t you?”

“Kind of.”

“You even saved Sana from drowning once…”

“Right.” *That happened.* “I guess I am.”

“So B-san, who couldn’t swim, was desperately waving about her arms to call for A-kun’s help,” Ryouko casually returned to this reality. “Naturally, he would want to save B-san. But there were cannibal mermen in this lake. The mermen had already surrounded B-san. Jumping in the water now would be signing his death warrant. That was evident.”

Asumi didn’t get where Ryouko was getting at. What point was there to this dumb story?

“Eventually, the cannibal mermen started swarming the drowning B-san. And despite B-san’s tears and screams, they bit her arms, neck, and head. They ripped her flesh off. They tore her eyeballs and organs as well. The lake’s surface was slowly turning red.”

Gross… Asumi grimaced.

“A-kun couldn’t do anything while B-san was getting eaten by the mermen. Except rowing as fast as he could to the shore to put himself in safety. A-kun couldn’t forget B-san’s expression of pain. B-san’s suffering when her flesh was ripped off and her head eaten was beyond imagination. A-kun was sitting alone on the shore…when suddenly,” she paused in her words, “God descended from the sky.”

“Huh?”

Asumi couldn’t help but react aloud at the shocking direction the story took. *God?*

“God spoke to A-kun: ‘You must have suffered. Therefore, I will rewind your time back to when you were on that boat. However, destiny cannot be changed. None can escape from it. So even after I rewind time, the boat will overturn. Even if you try to help her, B-san will drown and be eaten by the same mermen. You mustn’t forget that. …Here I go,’” she then pointed at

Asumi and screamed *BANG*. This peculiar situation didn't seem to diminish Ryouko's high spirits. "A-kun then went back through time to the world from a few minutes prior. To when he was having fun on the boat with B-san. They were already on the boat. B-san was smiling. However, A-kun *knew* that this smile would get eaten a few minutes later. And he had a knife in his possession." Ryouko gave Asumi a formal look. "Now, here is the quiz." Her gaze was provocative. "What should A-kun do next?"

"There is no solution."

Right after Asumi heard those words, the door was opened with great vigor.

She directed her gaze there by reflex. Someone was standing upright near the door. It was too dark to distinguish who. However, that Hysteric Glamour shirt belonged to...

Ryouko ran up to Asumi. A knife in hand.

A dry gunshot echoed.

Ryouko stopped in her tracks.

"Move a finger and I shoot," the individual said in a harsh, unpeaceful tone. *I knew it, it's Hiroyuki.* "Oh," he glanced at Asumi. "You were sleeping? Gee, how carefree. Here I'm putting my line on—"

"I absolutely wasn't sleeping."

"Then how about getting up?"

"I was going to..."

Asumi stood up. Her articulations hurt because of how long she'd stayed on the cold, hard floor.

"You two don't seem to get along, eh."

Ryouko said, still frozen in place.

"We're madly in love."

"Stop coming up with stupid delusions."

"Don't get so angry," Hiroyuki gave a brief answer. He had other things to handle at the moment. That was evident from his gaze and aim not leaving

Ryouko for a millisecond. “Now, accept that you’re done for, Jack the Stabber.”

“Who might you be? You are that man from Building F, right?”

Ryouko seemed calm.

“How about raising your hands at least? You’re being threatened with a gun, you know.”

“My, I didn’t notice.” However, Ryouko didn’t raise her hands. “Tell me, what did you mean by ‘There is no solution?’”

“I meant what I said. That quiz doesn’t have a solution.”

“You’re just running away,” Ryouko narrowed her eyes, displeased. “Even if there is no solution, one should choose the optimal course of action and carry it out.”

“Humans don’t have that right.”

“Then what? Does God have it?”

“Absolutely,” Hiroyuki answered on the spot.

“You guys won’t be able to arrest me,” Ryouko asserted. “I can see the future, so I know.”

“This is just a guess, but can’t you only see other people’s future? If you could see your own, you wouldn’t have let this situation happen.”

“True enough. But I only need to see myself in someone else’s future. For example, in your future—”

“Let’s cut the chatter short,” Hiroyuki interrupted her. “Hurry up and raise your hands, please. You don’t think this gun is purely for persuasion, do you?”

“So scary. Okay, sure, I get it.”

Ryouko swiftly raised her hands...and threw her knife in the same motion.

At the lantern.

With an expert’s skill.

The lantern broke.

Glass shattered.

Darkness took over.

Darkness.

Pure dark.

They couldn't see.

Asumi was scared.

Someone ran past her really fast.

It hurt.

She was pushed away.

She fell on her butt.

Gunshots.

One shot.

Two shots.

Even so, the footsteps didn't stop.

"Tsk, she got away."

A metallic sound. A flame appeared on the Zippo and illuminated its surroundings with an orange light.

Asumi looked around the room.

Ryouko was nowhere to be seen.

The broken lightbulb was in pieces.

She had run away.

Wasting no time, Hiroyuki turned on his heels and left the room. Asumi hurriedly followed him.

They were in an eerie building. The white walls were full of cracks and the linoleum on the floor had been peeled off. The doors and the ceiling were riddled with holes. There was also graffiti here and there drawn with spray cans. The kind of building one would see in a magazine special about ghost spots. That impression was further reinforced by the swaying flame from the lighter.

"You and Jack the Stabber are acquaintances?"

Hiroyuki kept running without looking back.

"Ah…yes. She is my childhood friend's big sister…"

Saying it out loud made her recognize how absurd that was.

“So your Juliette was quite close, huh,” he said as a joke. “It must take an insane dose of carefreeness to have not noticed until now.”

“Sorry for that.”

But he totally has a point.

“Well, I’m not any better either. I let Jack the Stabber escape after finally cornering her. I can’t be too harsh on you.”

“Um…” Asumi looked around at the hallway. “Where are we exactly?”

“Don’t you know about the ghost hospital? Near Lake Shikotsu.”

“Ah, I do.”

It was a bit of a famous building in the area for apparently having real ghosts show up, deterring even delinquents and lovers of the supernatural from visiting it. Asumi had seen it from the outside in the past, but she never expected this to be the place.

“Who cares about ghosts? Our problem is Jack the Stabber,” Hiroyuki said casually. “Say, can’t you look at where Jack the Stabber ran off to?”

“I obviously can’t. Unless they decide to kill someone.”

———

Carrying a mini flashlight around was the right choice. Jack the Stabber ripped the darkness apart and ran down the hallway.

…Well.

What to do now?

As that young man had pointed out, they couldn’t see their own future. They felt uneasy about being able to see the path people’s lives would take, but not the one they themselves would. Jack the Stabber had felt that for the longest time.

Being unable to see.

To Jack the Stabber, that was accompanied by fear.

…Well.

What to do now?

They could likely escape without much trouble. But they sensed that there was no meaning in running away from this situation. Moreover, Asumi knew their identity now. They would end up on the national wanted list if she reported her to the police. That was too much trouble. They would rather choose death.

Death.

That was the first time they were thinking about or imagining their own death. It proved more fun than they'd expected. Especially because it forced them to reminisce on the life they had led up to then.

Death...huh. It just doesn't feel real. Regrets. Errr, I wish I could finish that Multi book. That's about it I think? It's more than enough. It was impossible for Jack the Stabber to die with sizable regrets.

This morning, Jack the Stabber saw a certain person's future. They were a relatively important person to them, taxonomy-wise. *Let me see... Let's partake in their future.* For some reason, they found themselves thinking that. Maybe they got possesed for it to happen.

Barging into someone's life.

That was a first-time experience for Jack the Stabber.

They had done so in the form of murder many times over. However, the primary goal in those was to end these people's lives, a complete 180° compared to doing it to 'let one live.'

No. Strictly speaking, that wasn't the core for those. After all, I've commited all of those murders to 'let them live,' haven't I?

...There is no solution.

They found themselves recalling that young man's words.

Indeed...that quiz I told Asumi, on one hand, has an infinity of solutions, and on the other hand, has none. The quiz is a paradox; I can't deny that. It's in the domain of logic...no, of philosophy, perhaps. Or maybe they teach it in ethics class in elementary school.

...Whatever.

At any rate, my time was soon over.

I just wish I had a knife in my hands.

5

Fucking shattered. Fucking shattered.

Pain spread its dominion over my body and pushed me to a point where it was the only thing supporting me and allowing me to lean against a wall. My vision was getting more blurry by the second. My sensations were getting hazy. Was I free from gravity? Fuck, that's bad. I mean…that means I was gonna die, no?

I suddenly got overwhelmed by sleepiness. My premonition was becoming reality. I found myself annoyed at the candle for being so bright. But I couldn't afford to fall asleep. Ketouin Yuika was still in my car, I wanted to know where Mikuni Akiko had gone to, and, most importantly, I couldn't die without knowing the identity of the person who fucking shattered my plans.

I noticed a crack in the wooden plank sealing the window. I looked at the sky through it. A lightless moon only there for the show dared watching me. Heh, it's a wonder it hadn't fallen asleep out of boredom. Did I make for such a pleasant sight?

Footsteps approached.

Footsteps maintaining a strange regularity despite seeming in a hurry.

…Who is it?

Having somehow managed to crawl up to Toudou Yumie's corpse, I pulled out the knife from her stomach. Blood spilt. The footsteps didn't stop. In fact, they were slowly getting louder. They seemed to approach with a clear intent.

These footsteps stopped in front of room 206.

I didn't know who that was, but…I had to kill them.

I drove the sleepiness and intense pain out of my head, placed my hands on my knees, and used them to stand up. I was breathing like an exhausted dog. My vision was more hazy than in a thick fog and the floor was softer than a cloud. I could feel my blood falling off my body. I eked a step forward out of

me. Another step out of stubborness. Another step out of willpower. Yet another step by miracle. A total of four steps. I then readied the knife.

I would plunge the knife right in the middle of their stomach the moment they open the door. Then everything would be alright. Could I do it? Of course I could.

"Mmh," a cow grunted from behind the door. "Nmh." No, it couldn't be a cow.

The door opened.

As I thought, it was my sister.

"Mmh, I can't put up with it!" She entered room 206 and immediately closed the door behind her. "I mean they gang up on me and bully me. I'm really starting to feel gloomy. I just have to endure it for a bit." She then jumped on a bed with much vigor. "My, so you really got stabbed. I saw you getting stabbed this morning, Kimihiko. I wanted to warn you but stuff happened, you see. My bad," she stretched herself, not a care in the world. "Aah, geez, why can I see other people's future but not mine? It's so inconvenient. Also I wish I could expand the range of what I see. And choosing when I get to see—"

"Hey, Nee-san," I somehow strung words together. "What in the world are y-you doing here?"

"It's so dirty here, there are garbage bags everywhere. You're not even sorting the trash, also there's a weird odor. Get yourself together. It smells so bad here, geez. Be more kind to the Earth."

"Hey, Nee-sa—"

"You're gonna die. I just know that. Oh...is that a corpse?" Ryouko gave a look at what had been Toudou Yumie from atop the bed.

Woah, crap.

I had totally forgotten about that.

"Ah, ehm, that's..."

My body reached its limit at the same time as I started losing my head, making me collapse on the spot. Blood and garbage flew everywhere.

“No need to hide it, really. You suck at killing, eh. You don’t need to stab someone so many times for them to die. Just look at how much blood is coming out of it.”

“Hey…answer my question please,” I raised my upper body and picked up the knife. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Oh, that looks pretty nice,” Ryouko was in her own bubble. She probably couldn’t even hear me. “Kimihiko, give me that.”

“Hey!” I raised a scream. That echoed in my wounds. They stung like hell. “Oooouch… I beg you, just answer my question.”

“Mm?”

“Why are you here, Nee-san?”

“I want to ask *you* that. I thought I’d found a great spot, only to find there was someone occupying the place.” Ryouko was playing with the spring sticking out of the bed until she eventually got bored and slowly closed her eyes while suppressing a yawn. “Hey, if you’re going to make a mess, at least do it somewhere you’re not bothering others.”

“The fuck is that demand…”

“Dummy. I’m right.”

“Hey… Nee-san, are you the one who shattered me?”

I readied my knife anew.

“You’re the one who broke yourself,” she answered and lay on the bed. Geez, what the hell was she thinking? “Wow, what a horrible bed.”

“Not that, I’m asking if you’re the one who let Toudou Yumie and Mikuni Akiko escape.”

“Who?” She didn’t seem to be lying. “I only let Touko escape.”

“Touko…?”

Then, I once again heard footsteps.

Moreover, there were multiple of them this time.

“Aah, shit,” I blurted out a mix of hatred and confusion. “Who the fuck will it be next? Fucking shit!”

“Don’t use such foul language.”

“Foul what?”

“Geez…are they not going to give me a small break? Hey, Kimihiko, give me that knife.”

Ryouko stood up and glanced at the door for a brief moment.

“Why?”

“Do you want us to die?”

“I mean, I’m gonna die either way, no?”

I didn’t doubt her prophecies. So I could easily give up.

“Come on… I wish you’d stop using your death as a pretext to give up on everything. Keep hanging there until the very end. Then you can die all you want. Okay?”

That was weird coming from her. I told her that and slid the bloodied knife up to her. Not because I took her words to heart. I was merely curious what pushed her to say stuff like that.

“Oh, what? So it was a kitchen knife, huh.” She used the sheets to wipe the blood off the blade. “…Mn? What a find, it’s a perforated knife.”

“Huh?”

Something inside me reacted.

“Kimihiko, were you going to cook something here?”

Ryouko teased me and showed me the blade of what she’d thought to be a mere knife. The middle part of the blade was garnished with equidistant holes. She was right…it really was a perforated knife.

And the handle part was yellow.

Why did Toudou Yumie have that?

“Not the best kind to handle.”

Even so, she spun the knife around.

“Huh…you’re pretty deft,” I was a bit surprised. I never knew she was so skilled in that. “How about giving up on doujins and entering a circus?”

“Dummy, Multi is waiting for me. Come on, light more candles. One isn’t enough. Darkness works at my disadvantage.”

“Disadvantage?”

She told me to stop talking and do something. The footsteps were getting louder. She jumped from bed to bed like Yoshitsune,[30] starting from the one with broken springs and ending at the one closest to room 206's door. She then crouched and assumed a stance letting her rush out at any moment. Her eyes were glued to the door and her body similarly immobile.

It looked like I didn't have time to think. I crawled to the lockers while fighting the pain and lit four additional candles. I put them down around me. Gee…asking the wounded to work, she must have a heart of stone and a deficiency in proteins. She must be made out of only mitochondria. As I was thinking in the background about my sister's feeling and reached out for a fifth candle,

The door to room 206 opened.

6

"To think you would hide in here instead of leaving the hospital… Did you actually give up? Or is this part of your plan?"

"Who knows, you tell me," Ryouko was joking around.

"Well, either way, you're sure not making your last moments easier on us."

A man stood before the door.

I squinted my eyes to focus the blurr.

…This guy was,

This man was,

"Ootsuki Suzuhiko?"

"Yo, long time no see," Ootsuki greeted me with a smile…and a gun in hands. That gun was directed at my sister. "My, my, are you injured? It must be the work of Jack the Stabber, I assume."

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[30] Minamoto no Yoshitsune, a famous military commander from the Heian Era who, during the Battle of Dan-no-ura, jumped from ship to ship across eight ships to escape from Noritsune, a veteran warrior, who had boarded Yoshitsune's ship to assassinate him.

“Did you set Toudou Yumie and Mikuni Akiko free?” I asked on impulse, my eyes alternating between the gun and Ootsuki.

“God no. Why would I?”

True. He was the very person who’d abetted me into this.

“Hey, lad, I wouldn’t kill my younger brothers,” Ryouko said something cryptic. “Younger sisters are a different deal. Well, I didn’t kill her, though.”

“Huh? What are you—”

“You don’t need to know, Kimihiko.”

“...Kimihiko? Is Kimihiko-kun there?”

Someone appeared behind Ootsuki. I recalled that there were multiple footsteps. Fuck, who was it this time... Eh?

“Asumi?”

The fuck?

Asumi was standing behind Ootsuki.

She seemed as surprised as I was, looking at me with wide-open eyes. I panicked a bit. Enough to make me forget about my wounds for a second. Why would Asumi be here?

“Kimihiko-kun...why are you here? ...Eh?” Asumi looked at Toudou Yumie’s corpse, made visible by the candles. Shit. “...Who is that? Eh? Ah, what happened, Kimihiko-kun...your clothes are stained in red, is that b-blood? Hey, you’re all red. Hey, tell—” Asumi was as confused as if her brain was doing a handstand.

“Calm down,” Ootsuki calmly whispered.

“That’s... That’s!” Her voice stiffened. Her legs were trembling.

“It’s just a corpse. Why are you so shocked? I’ve known you to be better,” Ootsuki casually said after glancing at Toudou Yumie’s corpse.

Hey, hey, don’t just say that and steal the corpse from all its value.

“Th-that’s...”

Asumi was observing the corpse from behind Ootsuki.

“Kimihiko-kun killed her. He finally did. He didn’t seem eager at first so I was worried for a—”

“You’re lying!” Asumi screamed. Her face reflected her puzzlement.

“I’m telling the truth,” Ootsuki looked back at Asumi for a brief moment, “not a lie.”

“You’re lying!”

“And I keep telling you it’s the truth,” Ootsuki looked at me with a strained smile. “Right, Kimihiko-kun?”

I didn’t answer. But you can’t underestimate childhood friends. She apparently realized the truth through my reaction. She kept yelling that it couldn't be true.

“That has to be…a lie. Why? I mean, what could have pushed him?”

“Beats me. Avenging Sana-chan, perhaps?”

“…Sana-chan?”

“Shut up!” I screamed. I then slammed my bloodied fist against the floor flooded with blood. “What the fuck is your deal, you two?” The irrationality of the situation was pissing me off harder than hatred or anything could. “How dare you barge into people’s stories… This is my story, okay?! Don’t fucking come in and destroy it!”

“You’re wrong there.”

Ootsuki sounded as composed as ever.

“About what…”

“Looking at it from your perspective, indeed, this case is your story. But you see, from mine, this is my story. And, in the same way, to Toudou Yumie it was Toudou Yumie’s story.”

“Shut up!”

Who gives a fuck about dead people.

“But you’re the mastermind, aren’t you?” Ryouko asked Ootsuki. She was hiding the perforated knife I’d given her behind her back.

“Come on, don’t throw random accusations, now,” Ootsuki answered, still pointing a gun at her. “Okay, Jack the Stabber-san?”

“What?” Jack the Stabber…wasn’t that that famous psychopath?

“Jack the Stabber? Nee-san…what is this guy joking about? Hey, Nee-san.”

Her back, illuminated by the candles, didn’t budge.

“Kimihiko-kun…” Asumi said timidly. “Ryouko-san…is Jack the Stabber.”

“Come on, Asumi, the idiots should leave us alo—”

“I swear!” She sounded serious. “Ry-Ryouko-san is Jack the Stabber. …Kimihiko, did you really kill this girl? Tell me, I—”

“Nee-san, are you Jack the Stabber?”

I asked, somehow able to keep myself from laughing. Though I did it by flexing the muscles in my stomach which might be bad for my wounds. Apparently, enduring things was painful for someone gravely injured.

“I am.”

Ryouko’s back admitted it effortlessly.

“Not as a metaphor or whatnot?”

“No.”

“…”

What, hold on… Huh, I couldn’t laugh now. She really was Jack the Stabber? That can’t be. But Asumi wasn’t the type to joke in situations like these…

“Really funny, isn’t it?” Ootsuki said, not smiling.

“Is Nee-san really Jack the Stabber?”

“She is,” Ootsuki took a step inside room 206. “The very one who killed 80 girls.”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, only 79,” Ryouko said with a sigh.

“I must admit, we can see the work of recessive genes at work in the Kagami family’s blood. Both of you are criminals.”

“Shut up, Ootsuki,” I emitted as much hatred as I could. I couldn’t bear having my family insulted. “Say one more word and I’ll beat you up again.”

“Aren’t you the one all beaten up now? You’re in shambles, so pitiful.”

“…Ootsuki?” Asumi directed a puzzled look at Ootsuki. “Wasn’t your name Ketouin—”

“Ketouin!?”

I instinctively yelled.

Not…Ootsuki?

Ketouin?

I suddenly started shaking.

Ootsuki was…Ketouin?

That couldn’t be.

That couldn’t be.

I recalled Ketouin Yuika’s words.

This fucker.

I spat out a mix of saliva and blood, then spoke clearly,

“So you’re Ketouin Hiroyuki.”

“What did you hear from Nee-san?”

“I’ll fucking kill you.”

“What did you hear from Nee-san?” Ootsuki…Ketouin strained his voice.

He then pointed the gun at me.

“Hah, are you stupid or what? What’s the point in aiming your gun at a guy that’ll die anyway?”

A gunshot.

One of the candles got blown off. A candle at my feet exploded and got some wax on my cheeks. Now it was clear that it wasn’t an intricate replica.

“You seem a bit confused so I will take the lead,” after some silence, Ketouin’s voice echoed in room 206. “No complaints, I assume?”

I wiped the wax off my cheeks. Basically replacing it with blood. My left hand, pressing against my flank, was entirely covered in red. My bleeding didn’t seem to be getting any better. My breathing was becoming rougher. I must’ve been nearing my limit. But it was still too early. Give me a bit more time. Please.

“And what will you do with that lead?”

Another gunshot.

Toudou Yumie's head split open.

"No!" Asumi screamed.

"Completing the story, what else?"

"I've heard most of it from your big sister. I also heard about your crimes."

Completing it? I didn't care that much. The only thing I had to do was revert the crime to its original form.

"Well then, let's start with Kimihiko-kun's story."

In spite of all, emerging in-between the candles' light and the pure darkness lying in wait beyond the door, Ketouin was smiling. We were of the same breed.

7

"Your grandpa, Ketouin Hatakiyo, and his subordinates, Toudou Soujirou and Mikuni Yoshiaki. These three were obsessed with the kudan. Am I wrong?"

"Let me complement that," Ketouin answered. "Mikuni wasn't entirely convinced. He was the only one to have not seen the real deal."

"...The real deal?"

"Hey...what's that kudan thing?"

Asumi butted in.

"Ah yes, a kudan, you see..."

Ketouin prompted me with his jaw to explain it.

"Just don't laugh," I closed my hazy eyes and started with a warning. "A kudan, written by putting the character for human next to the one for cow, is a cow with a person's face. Or, some say, it's a person with a cow's face. It can apparently understand human languages and receive great prophecies. Moreover, it is said to be right 100% of the time," I suddenly felt like I was having a déjà-vu. I continued nevertheless. "It's a pretty popular monster in

Kyushu and some Chinese regions. Don't you ever hear people say 'kudan no gotoshi' for 'aforementioned'? Well that's the origin of the word."

Nobody laughed.

Even my loquacious sister was staring at Ketouin in silence. Was she only ever gonna show me her back?

"...And what about it? Isn't that just folklore? What does it have to do with anything?" Asumi asked, disrupting the silence. That was a valid question. I, too, wondered about similar things whilst hearing the story from Ketouin Yuika. 'What relevance could this legend, this ghost story, have?'

"As I said," I pointed at Ketouin with my blood-ridden fingers. "This guy's grandpa and his subordinates were obsessed with the kudan."

"But ghosts don't exist?"

"No, I don't mean it that way," I shook my head. "They were obsessed with the *idea* of the kudan. Kudans don't actually exist. Of course they don't. Someone convinced that they actually exist, no matter how fond of ghost stories they may be, is just an idiot."

"Then what—"

"Yeah I know. But the kudan is a complicated case with tons of documents backing up its existence." Ketouin Yuika had named a few of them, but I didn't remember any. "Also, the kudan had taken root in society until a few decades ago. It predicted the death of emperors, the Great Kanto Earthquake, and the last day of the Pacific War...that kind of thing."

"The kudan is clearly different from tengu, remnants, or other abstract entities. It was present until not long ago," Ketouin added. "Yanagita Kunio sent a scholar to hear from two elderly people who had actually visited the kudan...we even have their testimony."

"That's bullshit."

"It is not. It was in the *Okayama Prefecture Encyclopedia* published by Sanyo Newspapers."

“Refer to all the documents you want, there’s no way a cow would give birth to something with a human face! Use your common sense when you speak.”

“In the early 19th century, people treated gorillas like cryptids on the same rank as Nessie. That’s how faulty common sense is.”

“This guy’s grandfather, Ketouin Hatakiyo, and Toudou—though I don’t know exactly how they met—were the masterminds behind this case,” I paid no heed to Ketouin’s nonsense. “Ketouin Hatakiyo was born in the Ushimado region or whatever in Okayama Prefecture. Okayama is rich in folklore about the kudan so he must’ve grown up taking these seriously. So stupid.”

“Well, bovine deities are popular in Okayama. Apparently you would hear rumors about the kudan on a daily basis. Like, such-and-such’s manor has a dungeon and they are keeping a kudan inside, or, that hobo was able to climb back up thanks to a kudan’s prophecies. Most of these stemmed purely from jealousy, though,” Ketouin spoke casually in the dark room. But the precision with which he aimed his gun proved he hadn’t lowered his guard towards my sister.

“But who cares about those? They don’t cause any harm,” I found myself grinding my teeth. I used the faint amount of reasoning still in me to hold back my emotions from exploding. I flexed my stomach. Blood gushed out. A vicious cycle. “I don’t give a crap whether one believes in the kudan or not. ...But, but...”

“You seem to be having a hard time. Shall I take over?” Ketouin threw me a glance but quickly reverted his gaze to my sister. “Don’t you want to know how to artificially manufacture a kudan?”

“...Manufacture?” Asumi asked from behind Ketouin.

“Exactly,” Ketouin nodded. Wait, why were these two together again? It didn’t compute. “The most famous example of a human birthing a half-bovine-half-human creature is, of course, the Minotaur from ancient Greece. I assume none of you know how the Minotaur was born? Minos, king of Crete, hid the sacrifice-bull Poseidon had sent him in a farm, refusing to offer it to

the gods, and instead sacrificed another bull. In a fit of rage, Poseidon made Minos' wife, Pasiphaë, fall in love with that bull."

"In love? With a bull?" Asumi asked.

"Don't think too hard about it, it's a myth," Ketouin giggled. "Pasiphaë couldn't hope to control her feelings—in other words, she had the hots—and, unable to bear it, she asked the craftsman Daedalus to make a Trojan cow for her. Then…you know the rest, right?"

"Did they get a hint from that story?"

My reason had faltered to the point where every second felt like an eternity.

"Not quite, Kimihiko-kun. 'A girl raped and impregnated by a beast will give birth to a kudan.' That legend exists as is. I brought up the Minotaur for historical—"

"Shut up! Drop dead!" I screamed. I punched the floor where a substantial amount of blood had accumulated. "Fuck! Fuck!"

"My grandfather, Toudou, and Mikuni artificially created a kudan, and used its prophecies to climb up to where they are now. By interpreting themselves as the 'beasts.'"

"And if you put it plainly…" About 500 blood vessels exploded inside my head. "They kidnap, rape, and impregnate girls! And I heard you were helping them with that business, huh?"

"Rape is a pretty accusatory word."

"You raped Sana too, didn't you? Hey, fucking answer me!"

"Sana…chan?" Asumi reacted.

"Oh right, you didn't know, Asumi. Sana was raped. By these scumbags!"

"That's…no," Asumi was speechless.

"That's the truth," Ketouin casually admitted.

"NO!" Asumi flung away from Ketouin like a bullet up to the back wall. Her eyes, holding back tears, were lit with contempt. "You are insane!"

"What now, I'm the only one at fault for everything? Who in the world decided that? Did God tell you that?"

“Drop that lousy act,” Ryouko broke her long-kept silence.

But wait...she shouldn’t know that Sana was raped either.

...Why wasn’t she surprised?

“How rude. I’m in the theater club.”

Ketouin’s eyes switched between my immobile sister and Asumi.

“Then you have no talent.”

“As Kimihiko-kun said, I was involved with the creation of kudans,” Ketouin admitted. “Still, I have to say, we were both cursed with loquacious sisters, weren’t we?”

“Ketouin Yuika never speaks a word.”

I just couldn’t let that remark slide.

“She must have trusted you a lot, I bet. Or maybe she wanted you to save her from her insane family.”

“Heh, don’t say it yourself.”

“Self-awareness is important, you know.”

“You fucking scumbag!”

“What are you saying, when we’re equally insane?”

He made a face like I was overpraising him.

“Wh-what do you mean by that...” Asumi whispered.

I panicked.

“No, that’s—”

“Well, you see—”

“Hey, stop it!”

“You see, Kimihiko-kun kidnapped the daughters of the men who raped Sana-chan. Look...the corpse over there. That’s Toudou’s daughter, Yumie. Not only did he kidnap her, he also killed her.”

Asumi looked my way. Hey, don’t look at me with those eyes.

“And he’s far worse than me. Hear me out, Kimihiko-kun, murder is the same as rape. You keep complaining about rapes, but did the same yourself.”

“That’s sophism.”

“Is it? So, was it fun living as a prison guard?” Ketouin said in a cold voice.

“Don’t ridicule me…”

“I am absolutely not. I’m actually grateful to you.”

“Grateful…?”

What the fuck was he saying?

“You acted exactly as I had expected, didn’t you?”

“Wait, what are you…guh,” something surged up within me all of a sudden. I vomited blood yet again. “Blurghh, gah.”

“Kimihiko-kun!”

Asumi looked at me, worried.

However, Ryouko’s eyes didn’t move away from Ketouin. How could she be so cold? I couldn’t believe the same blood was flowing in our veins. I wiped away blood I couldn’t believe had been flowing in my veins. My mouth, arms, and stomach were all drenched in red. A poodle of blood had formed around me.

It was a miracle I hadn’t died yet.

“Ki-Kimihiko-kun…”

Asumi was on the verge of tears. Or she might be crying.

“…I’ll be okay.”

I forced myself.

“That seems painful. Shall I get you an ambulance? A yellow one, though.”

“Shut up…”

I spat out the blood that remained in my mouth.

“You’re the one who should shut up. After all, it will soon be time to tell *my* story.” Ketouin said in a forceful tone. To me, it appeared like he was doing it to hide the emotions tormenting him. “My grandfather, Toudou, and Mikuni also planted their seed inside Ketouin Yuika…my sister. Did she tell you that too?”

“Yeah…”

…They were all lunatics.

“As a human being, I just couldn’t tolerate that in particular. I mean, you get why, right? When it’s Sana-chan or anyone else, that’s a stranger to me. But Nee-san is my family. Family raping family is pure insanity.”

8

“Statistics showed that girls with shaman-like abilities have a higher propensity to give birth to kudans. But still, turning Nee-san into a vessel goes way over the line. Of course she would run away.”

“Hey, is Ketouin Yuika’s womb—”

“Don’t finish that sentence. But yeah…there’s probably someone’s baby inside,” Ketouin answered begrudgingly. “Though there is still time to abort it.”

“That’s fucked up…”

“I’m of the same mind.”

I imagined it.

Inside that slender belly,

There was a fetus…’s seed.

Aah, what the fuck was I thinking?

Kudans don’t exist.

“That means…” Asumi was stuck against the wall. “That means your grandfather…to his own granddaughter…”

“Yes, he creampied her.”

Asumi muttered, “He is insane,” once again.

“Exactly, he is. That crossed the line. And when someone goes too far, they must be punished appropriately. I think Kimihiko-kun agrees with me on that. Right?” The candles’ flames shook. “That’s why I sought to punish them three.”

“You just wanted revenge, right? To put it without fancy terms.” Ryouko butted in in a stern tone. The perforated knife…was still on hold.

“Nothing spoils the mood as bad as having the culprit confess their crimes themselves. Someone needs to save this situation.”

“What are you talking about? Are you that culprit?”

“Ignore what I said. Now…as for the contents of that revenge, simply killing the people who sullied Nee-san would satisfy me, but it wouldn’t give *her* any peace of mind. So I made the reasonable and perfectly comprehensible choice of kidnapping their daughters.”

…Eh?

When Ketouin had said that much, I realized the truth.

…He got me.

My spine and my body were taken over by something monumental.

Not shudders, astonishment, or anything that banal.

My brain did a handstand. My blood ran counterflow.

How could this be?

Touko had said my revenge gave my life value. And, though for a mere moment, I had accepted that idea.

However, I had been set up.

I was a worker ant.

I was a sacrifice-cow.

I found myself about to cry.

Ketouin continued nevertheless.

“But I would rather not sully my own hands. So I searched for a scapegoat that would act in my stead.”

“…And that was…me.”

“You really fell for it, didn’t you?” Ryouko seemed cheerful despite learning her brother had been set up.

“Why me?”

I was gazing at my blood-ridden body made visible by the flickering flames.

“We were careful in our selection of vessels. We investigated everything; are the parents working, do they have siblings, how is their financial

situation, etc. Once a vessel was chosen that way, we planted a seed in her, erased her memories of the ritual through drugs, then returned her to her family. Then, wanting to get rid of this baby she has never wished for, she visits a gynecologist under our control... That had been our method. Well, this is just to give you an idea," Ketouin paused in his explanation. "To search for a candidate to avenge Nee-san in my stead, I looked through the list of recent vessels. Naturally, you...the Kagami family, was on it. Then, on the fifth of August," Ketouin's gaze traveled back and forth between me and Ryouko, "that day's newspapers had an obituary about Sana-chan's death. That was a real surprise. Because, although we rape girls, we never kill them. And after looking more deeply into it, she seemed to have committed suicide. ...That piqued my interest. No, that's an excuse. I might have instinctively picked up the scent of a like-minded individual."

For some reason, fear assaulted me as Ketouin mouthed this last sentence. That was similar to the fear of having an important secret get exposed.

"Later on the same day, I took on Ootsuki's identity and paid you a visit. I mean, I couldn't really use the name Ketouin, could I? And Kimihiko-kun, you were exactly like I imagined you... I showed you the video tape to lead you on the right track and you carried out the revenge without me saying anything."

"So you were manipulating me," I said, feebly. I nearly collapsed onto the floor. "I...I thought I was acting on my own will... I..."

"Well, where's the problem? You earned a will of your own, albeit through temporary deceit. Also you wanted to take your revenge too, didn't you?"

"No. If you hadn't fooled me—"

"Come on, you can't play that card," Ketouin interrupted me. "Yes, I showed you that video tape, I revealed the identity of the people who'd raped Sana-chan, and I gave you notes detailing the schedules of their daughters—I made those myself, by the way; pretty informative, right? However, ultimately, that's all I ever did. I hadn't intervened once until today."

"No, but..."

I persisted.

“You were fully able to stop yourself from doing it. Am I wrong?”

I couldn’t argue back. He was right.

No matter what the trigger was, in the end, I had kidnapped Toudou Yumie, Mikuni Akiko, and Ketouin Yuika by my own will.

“But it was still an imperfect plan I had devised in a short time. It was lacking in some aspects. In my head you were to rape then kill the girls you kidnapped, and yet you went ahead and behaved like a gentleman… And so, I had to finish off Mikuni Akiko myself.”

“Wait, so that scream earlier was…”

“I didn’t have a choice,” Ketouin made excuses. “I couldn’t just let her get away, could I? I mean, it would be problematic if she called the police. Also…don’t forget that your bad supervision was the main cause for it. How could you let a little girl escape?”

“Don’t be stupid. She was handcuffed and the door was locked. It was perfect.”

“But the reality is that she escaped.”

“No. Someone set her free.”

“Someone?” Ketouin froze for an instant. “Who?”

“Just so you know, it wasn’t me. I don’t give a crap about what Kimihiko was doing,” Ryouko said in a sharp tone. “But I have a question for you instead.”

“What is it?”

“Why did you tell Kimihiko the truth so honestly?”

“The truth?”

“In the worst case scenario Kimihiko could have kidnapped your sister and killed her, right? You could have maneuvered around that by lying, so why did you include her as one of Kimihiko’s targets?”

I suddenly felt my consciousness getting more distant.

Ah…my phone was ringing.

But no one had noticed it. Why? It was really noisy, though. Whatever. I sneakily took it out of my pocket, making sure neither Ryouko nor Ketouin would notice. The screen was displaying my brother's number. Geez, how thoughtless could he be?! Even at times like this! I would complain to his ass... Pretending to wipe blood off my face, I put it against my ear.

"Can you hear me?" I whispered. "Sorry but now's not the—"

"I shall answer Ryouko's question," Souji suddenly said. "He liked the virgin Ketouin Yuika. But the Ketouin Yuika who had been raped and had lost her purity—though I'm not a fan of the phrasing—was damaged goods in his eyes. A tainted relic. That's probably what made him want to destroy her for good. Geez, men really are—"

"Please shut up," I cut him off, still whispering. "We're busy right now. So—"

"It's like when one buys a brand new bicycle. They treat it with care at first, but once the slightest scratch gets engraved on it, they stop caring about its state. It's even worse actually, they try to damage it further to lower its worth. Did that never happen to you?"

Aah, shut up, moron.

Why can't you stop?!

"And the same goes for you, Kimihiko, right?" Souji was still going on. I had a bad feeling. "You went through the same experience with Sana. That's why, that day...after she confessed to you she had been raped, you killed her in Elephant Park. For the sole purpose of keeping your inner ideal of Sana from degrading."

"You're wrong!"

He was. But, no, he was...he wasn't.

"You're wasting your time. Your thoughts are as clear as crystal to me."

"That's because she...I mean, Sana was crying and said some men violated her. That's why..."

...It's over.

Second of August, at night.

I found Sana lying unconscious in front of Elephant Park.

...It's all over for me.

Sana told me that in the park, late that night.

She then retold me her experience in tears.

...My stomach hurts. Also...I can feel something hot.

Sana had been raped.

Sana had been broken.

My head was encroached by a void.

An unconditional virginity like an anime heroine.

That vanished from within Sana.

She had been sullied.

When I realized that, I was overcome with profound disappointment.

Disappointment?

...Eh? What? Ah—

The next thing I knew, I was strangling Sana.

...No! Stop. Please. No. Don't, don't, don't.

I strangled her to death.

I completely destroyed Sana. I crushed her trachea and broke her neck.

...Don't, aaaargh. It hurts...

"Onii-chan."

I didn't want to admit it. I wanted to break her. I wanted to keep monopolizing her. That's all I could feel. That's all there was to it, if put into words. That's why I didn't want to explain myself, the more I put my feelings into concrete words, the worse they looked.

"That's why...that's why I..."

"That's why you killed Sana?" Souji said, maliciously.

Everyone in room 206 was looking at me.

For some reason, they all wore a perplexed expression on their faces.

Eh, what had happened?

My eyes met with Ryouko's, who had turned back my way.

“What are you looking at, Ryouko, is my face that marvelous?” Souji’s voice came out of the phone with a hint of sadness attached to it, for once.

“Y… Y-you…” she opened her eyes wide and now looked astonished. That was a rare sight. “Are you Souji?”

I found it strange that she could hear his voice given how far she was from the phone.

“Yeah, Ryouko, but don’t get the wrong idea. This isn’t a case of split personality or anything of the likes,” he hurried to explain. “I’m a Kagami Souji that Kimihiko manufactured himself which then, through sheer delusions, acquired an ego of his own…that should explain it decently. Kimihiko brought me back to life inside his head to escape from the fact that I had died.”

“When did Kimihiko create you?” Ryouko asked. Her expression had already reverted to normal.

“The very day I died.”

“Heh, he’s pretty fast.”

“Hey, Nii-san, what are you saying… What do you mean, you died?”

“I died five years ago in a plane crash. Kimihiko…you’re the only one who doesn’t know that.”

“You’re not making any sense,” I put more strength in my grip on the phone. “I mean, aren’t we talking right—”

“To others you sound like you’re talking to yourself. You’re speaking my lines. We’ve never spoken at the same time, have we?”

“Ah…”

My entire body jolted.

Dead? Souji? Personalities? Delusions?

“Sorry to bother you,” Ryouko was glaring at me. “But is it true that you killed Sana?”

“It is,” Souji answered. “Moreover, this guy…he fucked Sana’s corpse. In the park toilets. Makes you laugh, doesn’t it?”

“WAAAAAAAH!” I yelled. “Hey moron, don’t say that!”

“Eh, why?”

“Do I have to say it…”

“Pervert,” Ryouko slid in an insult.

“I don’t get it personally. Why did you feel like having intercourse with a corpse? Did you want to retrieve Sana? Was that to lower her worth even further? Or you were simply in need of a sex doll—”

“Shut up, shut the fuck up!”

I screamed.

I turned into a scream.

My blood and soul came out of my mouth.

Blood erupted out of my flank.

My head hurt like it was about to split.

Huh…my body suddenly felt lighter.

Mm? There was a ceiling ahead of me now. Why?

“That’s because you fell, what else?” My phone fell near my ear. It sank in the pond of blood. “Kimihiko is already done for. Both mentally and physically, he reached his limit.”

“Hey, explain yourself.”

Ryouko didn’t give up.

“There is nothing to explain,” my body was failing on me so I only lifted my head. That was still painful. “Kimihiko killed Sana. And he had sex with her corpse. These facts are all there is to it.”

“Why are you revealing that now, come on!”

“At first I wanted to keep my mouth shut. But we’re dead anyway, so…”

My ears fled from me.

My body was losing its senses.

My vision was turning white.

I was slowly fading away.

It felt like my body was levitating.

I was slowly fading away.

Sana.

Sorry.

I'm sorry.

"I-I can't!" Asumi carried her head with both hands and crouched where she was. "I-I'm surrounded by murderers. ...I can't bear it. Make it stop."

"Then go to sleep," Ryouko said in a kind voice.

Asumi didn't answer.

"Now, shall we put an end to this charade? Still, this really hurts, huh. Despite pain not even being a necessary sensation..." Souji touched the wound on my flank. An intense pain, maybe sharp, maybe dull, coursed through me. "Oouuh!" I couldn't bear it and screamed. Blood flowed into my mouth. "Agh, it hurts... Hey, Kimihiko, don't complain for this little if you're a man," Souji gave me a nonsensical warning. "Who cares about genders, what hurts hurts! If you were in as much pain as you pretended to be in, you wouldn't be able to reply like that. No, it's the adrenaline that's—"

"What an interesting condition," Ketouin had totally dropped his guard against Ryouko and was watching over me. "At least you can't get lonely even when you're alone."

"Hi there, Ketouin Hiroyuki. Nice to meet you...I think?"

I glared at Ketouin.

"I'm grateful to you for explaining my sentiments towards my sister. It's not the kind of thing I should be the one to say."

"Does that mean you acknowledge it?"

"Yes."

Ketouin warped his expression barely standing out in the dim room and nodded.

"Can you tell me one thing? Did you love Ketouin Yuika sentimentally? Then when you set up Kimihiko to kidnap her—"

"Please refrain from going too far with your imagination," Ketouin took a stern expression. "I really don't want to say this, but your little brother is the same as me, isn't he?"

"Yeah, you guys are birds in a flock. So you're asking me to keep silent?"

“Exactly.”

“Very well, let’s say no more, then.”

“You can control Kimihiko-kun’s body for a short period, can’t you? During his sleep, maybe?” Ketouin asked confidently to change the topic.

“Heh,” Souji’s voice, coming out of the phone, was jovial.

“You took control over Kimihiko-kun’s body and released Toudou Yumie and Mikuni Akiko. Ah, and I presume you were the one who disguised Sana-chan’s murder as a suicide? But the handwriting should…oh, I see,” having seemingly reached a conclusion on his own, he looked down on me. Huh… The fuck he meant, ‘oh I get it all now’?

“Why did you think I could control Kimihiko’s body?” Souji asked.

“Well, the keys to the padlocks and the handcuffs were constantly in Kimihiko-kun’s care. So only him and you could use them freely. And it’s unlikely Kimihiko-kun would let the two girls he had acquired after much hardships, right?” Ketouin answered fluently. “That leaves us with only one possibility: You set them free.”

“Yep, bingo.”

What the fuck?!

Anger and bloodthirst exploded within me.

“Hey, Nii-san! How dare you, it’s my story…it’s mine.”

But he didn’t answer.

“Still, I don’t understand your motivation. I assume you disguised Sana-chan’s corpse so that Kimihiko-kun’s crime wouldn’t be exposed…but why let Toudou Yumie and Mikuni Akiko escape?”

Ketouin aimed his gun at me.

“…I changed my mind, you see. I came to want to be killed. Murdered.”

He then looked over at Ryouko and said kill me.

“No way.”

She refused.

“I knew you would say that. You’re always straightforward like that. Well then…Ryouko,” Souji moved on to the next topic. “Let’s talk about you now. Let’s tell the story of the leading part, the kudan.”

9

“Nee-san is the kudan…? Exactly. No, that can’t be She doesn’t look like a cow at all.”

“Shut up! I might have been eating a bit too much lately, but still,’ Ryouko yelled at me. She hated remarks of the type.

“I said you *didn’t* look like a cow You’ve always been slender and— Shut your trap, Kimihiko, your role is over. Huh? What are you talking about? Kimihiko, stop focusing on the kudan’s appearance Look at its essence A kudan refers to someone with prophetic powers.”

Prophetic…powers?

That perfectly described Ryouko.

“Very astute,” Ketouin nodded. “We don’t know how it works exactly, but, since ancient times, children born from rape often possess prophetic…or at least strange abilities.”

“Was that in those documents too?”

“It was,” Ketouin answered honestly. “Our production method—impregnating young girls with the kudan by having beasts rape them—is accomplished, as I interpret it, through symbolism. The beasts being men. The raped girls giving birth to prophets…to kudans.”

“I would call that a self-serving interpretation.”

“But the statistics show its success. Well, it probably depends on other factors, though. But the kudan was born.”

“Eh…hold on,” having noticed a certain fact, I butted in. “If Nee-san is the kudan…then she’s…”

“Yes, I’m only half blood-related to you. Same womb but different seed. I might even be Ketouin’s daughter.”

“Why did you never tell me, Nee-san!? Stop screaming Kimihiko, it echoes in your wounds.”

“Dummy, why would you need to know that stuff?”

Ryouko shrugged her shoulders, sounding fed up.

“Why?”

“To explain that I would also need to explain that mom was raped.”

“Oh…”

“Was that information so crucial to you? So much that you want me to hurt mom for it?”

“Heh, it’s rare for you to be such a romanticist.”

“Who said that one? Souji?”

She knitted her eyebrows.

“It’s me, Souji,” he answered. “I really hate hypocrisy. You should know that.” I got pissed at what he said. “And what about you Nii-san Didn’t you let the girls I had detained escape? How is that not hypocrisy? I told you why I wanted to be killed. Heh so a sort of disguised suicide? Basically Hey Kimihiko Don’t say anything anymore I already told you that your role is over,” Souji said resolutely. “Let’s set aside my suicidal wish. More importantly, Ryouko…why did you kill so many people? I want to know your motivation.”

“How about telling him that cannibal mermen story, Jack the Stabber-san?” Ketouin suggested.

What did he mean, cannibal mermen?

“Sounds like you figured it out,” she said and faced Ketouin again.

“Well, there are some things that only I know here. Plus…anyone would understand if they were told that allegory,” he said and looked at Asumi, who was crouching on the floor. “Right? Asumi-chan.”

Asumi didn’t answer.

“Oh my, what do we have here? Someone seems to be escaping from reality,” Ketouin said, sympathetic. He then shifted his gaze to me, swimming in my own blood on the ground. “Jack the Stabber-san’s motive is

entirely made out of that hypocrisy you hate so much. Can you confirm, Jack the Stabber-san?"

"Yes, you're absolutely right."

"You…were murdering the girls we had chosen to be vessels. Did I get that right?"

"Yes, you're absolutely right."

Ryouko nodded.

"Jack the Stabber-san," he restored his wariness against her. "No matter what the prophecies tell you, you don't have the right to kill these girls. What you did was nothing more than egoistical euthanasia."

"Of course I'm aware," she replied. "And since these were euthanasias, I consulted their intentions. 'This will happen to you in the near future, do you want to live even so?'"

"What a question. I'm amazed they believed you with that."

"Sincerity gets across."

"So 80 of these girls chose death. Death over humiliation, eh."

"A fair amount also accepted the rape. Sana was one of them."

"How laughable," Ketouin said as though he was sighing. "People sure die for stupid reasons."

But I didn't laugh. I was reminiscing about Touko despite the pain.

Touko has said she would rather die than be touched by old men.

She meant that claim.

So I wondered…could I mock that decision?

Ryouko, Ketouin, and I all murdered for selfish reasons. No…if you dig to the core, any murder's motive will be selfish. No matter what grander purpose or mission there might be behind, one cannot stop thinking as an individual. For money, for religion, for family, for freedom, for the world… How can I put it…in the end, it's always for that person's sake.

Then, looking at it objectively, no matter how dumb a reason for suicide may seem, no one can complain about it. That's common sense in this world. No, it *should* be common sense.

"Hey, take that back…" I couldn't tell what face Ryouko was making from here, but she must have been glaring at him with her glacial eyes as usual. "I bet you don't know how painful rape is. Let me tell you, then. Rape is even more evil than arson, theft, or murder. At least in terms of how big the mental shock is. Do you get it?"

"I sure don't. I'm always on the raping side, after all."

"I'll kill you."

"You can't," Ketouin checked his resolve and readjusted his gun's aim. "You cannot do anything in your state," he put more strength on the trigger. "I will give you 30 seconds for you to think this over. Will you have a change of mind and cooperate with us? Or will you die here and now?"

"I'm a failed kudan, you know? I can't predict the future like you guys want me to. I can merely see fragments of a person's near future. I've never predicted any stock market crash. Ah, but I've won the lottery. 30 thousand yen, twice."

"You won what now? You never told me that," Souji joked.

How could he have the guts to joke in this situation?

"We don't mind turning a blind eye to some unevenness."

"If you want perfection go look for Clow Reed.[31] In China, that is."

"Your time is nearly up. What is your answer?"

"Is that a Muska impression?[32]"

"Who is that?"

"I have one more question."

"It's on the house. Go ahead."

"Why did it take you eight years to find me?"

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[31] A character from *Cardcaptor Sakura* reputed to be the greatest magician of all time. One of his abilities, Prophetic Dreams, allows him to see the future in its entirety instead of in parts, like most other people with similar abilities.

[32] Muska, or Romuska Palo Ur Laputa, is the main antagonist from the Ghibli film *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*.

“Well…I’m embarrassed to admit to that, but Ootsuki-san stole our previous list,” Ketouin put up a strained smile. “So we lost track of the vessels.”

“Moron,” Ryouko said coldly.

“I bet he wanted to monopolize the kudan for Suzuhiko-kun’s sake. His feelings are far from unreasonable, but still…”

Ootsuki? Who the fuck is Ootsuki? I mean, wasn’t it Ketouin’s fake name…wait, Suzuhiko? But that’s his… Ahh, my consciousness!

“That man is as selfish as ever, huh,” Ryouko whispered in annoyance.

“Being quite harsh, aren’t you?”

It was from an unfamiliar voice.

Until then, nobody had noticed the person standing behind Ketouin. A middle-aged man wearing a beige suit. He was pressing something against Ketouin’s temple. But my vision was so blurry I couldn’t tell what that was or who that person was. Who? Shit, who was he… Who the fuck was that guy trying to steal my story from me once again? I might or might not have seen him before…

“You shouldn’t be trusted with something as dangerous as a gun,” apparently he was holding a gun. “Keep yourself from doing things you might regret.”

Geez, guns everywhere. Can someone arrest them for possession of firearms? But if the police was here they would arrest you for murder. Souji told me in a voice so sneaky only I could hear him. I told him I didn’t mind. I was lying.

“Things *I* might regret? If you force me to put more strength in my index, *you* will be the one to regret it, though.”

That was a witty answer. He must’ve spent all night coming up with it.

“Are you here for me?” Ryouko asked.

“Yeah, of course,” the man answered.

“Stealing the benefits, eh?”

“That’s how I always operate,” the middle-aged man snorted.

“I won’t let you have it this time.”

“Then I won’t leave you a choice.”

“Hey! Stop talking between the two of you, I’m not going to let anyone capture me,” Ryouko hit the bed’s mattress a few times.

“Don’t move from where you are either,” the man said sternly.

“You’re always stealing from others. Is it any fun living like that?”

“…I don’t care what you think of me, Jack the Stabber is mine. Now, throw your gun away and raise your hands, lad.”

“Shut up.”

“Huh?” the man said in a moronic voice.

“Who do you think you are talking to?” On the other hand, Ketouin’s carried well. “Learn some respect.”

“What are you on… D-do y-you want me to shoot?”

Man…why the fuck was he so scared when he clearly had the upper hand? I was speechless. This man couldn’t tell you the definition of guts. Taking a closer look, his face indeed made him seem like a weakling.

“I’m just joking,” Ketouin adjusted his breathing. “…Don’t worry, I am reasonable. I will throw my gun away now.”

Ketouin raised both hands and, as announced, dropped his gun to the floor. He then grabbed the man’s right hand, the one holding the gun, and pulled it forward with a twisting motion. The man’s body flew into the air before being pressed against the floor the next moment. Sounds that must have to do with bones or articulations echoed in the room. Followed by groans. The man’s gun had dropped near Ketouin’s feet.

“Is that aikido? So cool!” Ryouko reacted like a kid watching a hero show on a department store’s rooftop.

Ketouin picked up his own gun and aimed it at the man cowering on the floor.

The man turned around. I couldn’t see it from here, but his face must have painted a picture of despair.

“Did you come here to be killed?”

That was a death sentence. Ketouin fired a lead bullet into his cranium without waiting for a reply.

Brain parts and blood erupted from him.

The middle-aged man then died. What a forgettable dude. Well, for a small fry like him, that was about right.

Asumi was looking at the new corpse. She didn't cry nor scream anymore. Her sensations might've gone numb. And I was experiencing the same thing. My sense of pain, of fear, of loss, of remorse…all these emotions that are essential in one's life had numbed inside me and now formed a hole instead. Probably because a dead man doesn't need those. Oh, makes sense…so dying is similar to becoming smart…

"NOOOOO!" Asumi, whom I thought had numbed, suddenly broke into a shriek. She covered her face with both hands. What was her deal? "I-I saw… I-I," she was shaking her head. "I saw it! You're killing again! I can't…"

"Really."

Ryouko made her move.

She grabbed the perforated knife she'd been hiding behind her back tight and charged at Ketouin like a boar in heat.

"How sly," Souji's voice came out of the phone.

Focusing his attention on Asumi slowed down Ketouin's reaction just the right amount. He aimed his gun with the intention to shoot, but Ryouko's knife reached his gun-holding, right hand before he could. Something fell along with the gun. …A finger.

"However, being sly is necessary to live. Ryouko is determined to live on."

"Too weak!" Ryouko screamed.

"Shoot, this is messed up!" Ketouin screamed.

"Noo! I can see it…I can see it," Asumi writhed about.

Except me, everyone alive in the room was desperately doing something.

Ryouko kicked away the gun Ketouin had dropped, then thrusted the perforated knife forward one more time. Ketouin probably thought he couldn't dodge with only his upper body, so he lowered his hips to avoid

it…however, he slipped on my blood (or Toudou Yumie's, for all I know) and fell on his butt. Naturally, my sly sister wouldn't let that opportunity go to waste. A follow up. However, her knife didn't slash Ketouin's throat open; it stopped right before. Ketouin was holding a gun against her chest.

The two were frozen like a stone gemini statue.

"Too bad… I had a spare gun. You can thank Ootsuki-san."

"We're like Spike and Vicious,[33]" Ryouko muttered with a straight face.

"Now, what will you choose? We can't stay in this position forever, can we?"

"If you shoot, I'll kill you."

"And if you slash at me, I will kill you too."

A tangled mess of nerves.

Neither moved an inch.

Ryouko and Ketouin stayed still. They were both breathing loudly.

"What do you choose?" Ketouin asked again.

"…I just had a great idea."

"Hoh. What kind?"

"I'll let you off the hook, so you do the same. And we'll both live."

"Are you stupid?"

"Then it only leaves death on the table for us. Let's both die," Ryouko said simply, but resolutely. What a magnificent personality. Her affection for Yuna showed here.

"…" Ketouin was thinking. "…Fine. Let's do as you suggested."

"I'm glad you can be reasonable. And you should be, too."

Ryouko slightly backed her knife from Ketouin's neck. Ketouin put down his gun. Ryouko put down her knife too. Ketouin slowly stood up. They then both took a step back. Ketouin kicked the gun lying on the floor away. Ryouko kicked her knife too.

Asumi's screams had turned into sobbings.

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[33] Spike Spiegel and Vicious, respectively the protagonist and main antagonist of the anime *Cowboy Bebop*.

“I’m only letting you go this one time,” Ketouin said while blood shed from his severed ring finger. “Once we leave this place, I will go back to pursuing you.”

“Do whatever,” Ryouko answered with a smile.

“Who should leave first?”

“Me, obviously,” Ryouko trotted to room 206’s door. “...Kimihiko,” she then looked at me with the cold eyes proprietary to the women of the Kagami family. “This is where we part. I think Sana will pay you a visit so tell her hi for me. I’m sorry.”

She lightly waved at me then left.

“Oh, my finger.”

Once Ryouko had disappeared, Ketouin suddenly remembered that and picked up his finger from the floor.

“Are you leaving too?” Souji asked.

“Well, there is no purpose in staying here any longer,” Ketouin put both guns away in his pockets. “I will take my leave right away.”

“I want to hear your feelings before you go.”

“My feelings?”

“Yes, regarding this case.”

“I mean...the case still isn’t over,” he made a perplexed expression. “It will probably continue its course just as before.”

“Will it?” Souji objected. “To me, it looks like it’s on the verge of dying down. Also, you said the case isn’t over but, albeit in a restricted sense, it has come to a proper conclusion.”

“The only thing that will conclude is your lives,” Ketouin carried Asumi, who was lying on the floor, on his back. She didn’t move an inch. She was asleep. “Heh, I guess sleep is the greatest escape there is.”

“That reminds me...what’s your relation with Asumi-chan?” Souji asked as though he had just remembered that fact. “Since we’re elucidating mysteries, this is the biggest one. Genuinely.”

“We are partners.”

“Just don’t treat her too roughly. She’s quite delicate despite how she might appear at first.”

“I know, I will be careful.”

Ketouin left room 206 after giving a brief answer. He really left the scene as though it was nothing.

My body was cold. Like during a class following pool activities.

Oh, right…I was going to die. Dead people don’t need warmth. I rested my head on the floor and looked up at the ceiling with my blurry eyes, but then got bored of it and closed my eyes.

“They say death is always lonesome, but that doesn’t apply to us. Don’t you think, Kimihiko?”

Souji talked from the other end of the phone.

“Say, Nii-san.”

I asked, my eyes still closed.

“What is it?”

“Will they take Ketouin Yuika back?”

“Probably. Does that linger on you?”

“…Yeah.”

I was as good as dead, but it still felt embarrassing to give him such a clear answer.

“Well, don’t mind it too much,” he said, optimistically. “He might be a fiend but he wouldn’t treat his sister badly. Don’t forget this whole case happened for Ketouin Yuika’s sake. He doesn’t care in the slightest for the kudan. So he has already attained his goal.”

“It’s kinda frustrating how I was treated…”

“That you served as his pawn?”

“Yeah… Was I just another small fry?”

“Small fry or not, you are yourself in your own story,” Souji said as if soothing an infant. “So Kimihiko, you are the main character of this story.”

“Are you trying to console me? I don’t recognize you—”

“You might be a lunatic, a deviant, and a gigantic moron, but we’re still brothers. I ought to be kind at least in the end. Also I’m one of the people responsible for breaking you.”

“You’re not making any sense… Mn?” Then, I picked up a bizarre odor. “What’s that smell?”

“It’s gasoline,” Souji answered on the spot. “Ketouin Hiroyuki’s doing… He really thought of everything. Just how long has he been prepared for this? I hadn’t noticed at all.”

“What is he going to do with gaso—”

“Burn the building, what else?”

He sounded like I had asked something obvious.

“Burn?”

“Combustion is the best way to go about erasing proof.”

“Proof of what?”

“Ketouin Hiroyuki wants to destroy all proof that he ever set foot inside the ghost hospital.”

“Fuck!” I broke into my last fit of anger. “So he’s planning on pinning it on me.”

“Pinning it? You’re not innocent eith—”

“Yeah, I’m fully aware of the crimes I committed.” The smell of gasoline was getting stronger. “Aah, fuck. Fuck!”

“I told you to stop screaming, it hurts…mn?”

“What?”

“It’s time.”

“For what?”

“I will step back to let you enjoy it. See you.”

“Eh, hold on.”

“I told you that’s what happens when you neglect the act of confirming a death.”

“Hey, wait, don’t—”

The call ended. Was it the end? Aah, geez, every single one of them left me behind…

“Onii-chan.”

“Eh?”

I opened my eyes in surprise.

There was someone showing in a corner of my retina.

I slowly turned my head.

…Sana.

Sana was standing there.

“Sana? Ah, no, you shouldn’t…”

It had to be a hallucination.

It had to be a hallucination.

I mean, I had killed Sana with my own hands.

“Onii-chan.”

Sana crouched before me. Blood got on her feet and skirt.

She then grabbed my phone, swimming in blood, and flinged it away.

Crouching means she had legs.

And legs mean…she wasn’t a ghost.

Was this reality?

…Oh.

That’s it, I had done it again.

After Souji, now I had recreated Sana.

“Onii-chan.”

Her voice was gentle.

Not angry in the slightest.

The Sana my wishes had materialized was very kind.

“Onii-chan.”

“Sana…I-I…”

Aah, my wounds hurt.

They hurt to death.

Oh right, because I was about to die.

Sana.

“Sana, Sana…”

…Sana.

Sa,

My brain ruptured.

My memories started displaying.

That unpleasant episode of me doing something outrageous in front of the crowded funeral hall on the day of the eldest daughter’s funeral. A pleasant episode of Yuna eating Sana’s birthday cake. One where I was forced to help out the second daughter to apply the tones to her sketchy doujin. One day the eldest son brought home a weird-looking robot. Naomi once lost consciousness after being forced to eat meat at school. The extreme disappointment I felt when the gifts the second son had brought back from France were pics of strippers. Did mom still have our graduation albums from elementary school around? Our dad…I had no memories of him. Half because the age difference was small, I was in charge of babysitting Sana. We played together, we slept together…

That reminded me of that dying dog.

…Sana and I were playing in a park and an injured dog came waddling in our direction. It had probably been hit by a car. One of its front legs was bending in a weird direction and blood was flowing out of its nose and mouth…

I see.

So that dog was me.

Was that a stretch?

Nah.

After all, Sana had come to see me depart.

…Sana abruptly hugged the bloodied, dirty dog. I was stunned and couldn’t do anything…

Sana hugged the bloodied, dirty me. I closed my eyes again to this gentle sensation.

“Onii-chan, let’s run away.”

Sana enlaced me, paying no heed to the blood, and made that suggestion with her cute voice

“Run…away?”

My voice was incredibly hoarse.

“Onee-chan, Asumi-chan, and everyone else abandoned you, but I will never do that.”

Sana pressed her cheeks against mine.

This was,

My wishes.

Then,

Then,

My wishes were…

“Onii-chan

An explosion roaring downstairs covered what she said past this point.

10

Her escapade over, Asumi woke up.

…Huh?

The sound of bugs.

A warm breeze.

I am…outside.

Her body had been abandoned in the forest. She was in the same state as a suitcase full of money thrown away to camouflage tax evasion. She looked around her. Luckily, the forest ended half a dozen meters ahead.

Why…am I here? I think…right, there were Kimihiko, Ryouko, and Hiroyuki, and they all talked about that weird word…the kudan, was it? Ah, and Ryouko is Jack the Stabber, and Kimihiko…what did he do?

As she was trying to remember, an explosion roared nearby. It caused quite the tremor. Asumi crouched by reflex and covered her ears. A second, a third…the explosions didn't stop.

…What is happening?

She slightly bent her upper body back and looked at the spot the explosions were coming from. There was a clearing ahead.

The explosions kept going.

What is exploding?

Asumi stood up, set her mind, and progressed through the forest.

The night sky.

A bland moon.

And the sounds of many explosions.

These sounds came from the ruins standing before her eyes.

The ghost hospital.

Another explosion echoed.

The hospital's windows shattered as fire erupted from them.

Smoke rose up.

The old and rotten concrete collapsed like a dry sweet.

Asumi was standing stock still.

The ghost hospital…oh, I see. I remember everything now. If Hiroyuki was telling the truth, then Kimihiko and Ryouko should be inside…

No way! No way! No way!

Asumi was in denial.

Don't end!

Asumi pleaded.

Avenging Touko. Taking back what was her. Freeing herself from Jack the Stabber. These were her wishes. The principles backing her actions. Her story's meaning. Her essence as a character.

However, none of these wishes were resolved inside Asumi. If a resolution directly implies a *saving*, then, despite Asumi's case having met its demise, there was still no saving in sight.

Asumi rejected that reality. *No! Let me end this properly...I still haven't done anything...*

However, lacking the courage to set foot inside the collapsing hospital, she could only stand there.

Not even noticing the car that passed behind her.

Epilogue

———

"Did you go and bid Kimihiko farewell?"

Jack the Stabber—no, enough with using that lousy appellation, there was no longer any need to cypher my ego with symbols—I asked Sana, who was sitting in the back.

"Nuh-uh," she answered briefly. "Say, Onee-chan."

"What?"

"Why didn't you save Onii-chan?"

"Why ask that now?"

I was slightly taken aback.

"Why didn't you save him?"

"It's not that I didn't," I corrected her. "I couldn't. You wouldn't ask that if you saw how much he was bleeding."

"Was there *really* no hope for him?"

"You don't give up, eh. Don't forget I graduated from medical school. I was even extolled as a young genius in—"

"Stop lying. Didn't you drop out of high school?"

"What a strict sister I have..." Who cares about one's academic background. "Anyway, that's enough about Kimihiko. Really. Don't you feel bad for him?"

"I wonder what he's doing right now..."

I directed my gaze to Sana in the rearview mirror. She was just there in the back of the car and weirdly didn't feel real. However, she was alive.

"Either turned into ground meat or burned to a crisp. Or both, for all I know. Like a hamburger."

I stepped on the clutch pedal and changed gears. Lake Shikotsu was on our right. The moon was illuminating the water.

"Ouch," Sana frowned. "You're so cold, Onee-chan, like a frosted cake."

“Frosted cakes aren’t necessarily cold. And you don’t have to worry, he’s probably dreaming about you so hard he can’t even feel pain. Say, why did you only come out now? Who told you to?”

“Teehee, it’s a secret.”

Sana dodged with a smile. Geez…your ‘teehee’ would only work against Kimihiko.

“Tell me, don’t you hate Kimihiko?”

“I would never,” she answered on the spot.

“Even though he killed you?”

“Yes. I mean, his bloodlust wasn’t completely unjustified.”

“You’re a strange one, eh,” I stepped on the gas pedal and came out onto a narrow road only semi-trailers drove on. “Ah, but didn’t he rape you after killing you? What about that?”

“Right… That was a bit of a surprise, for sure,” Sana lowered her shoulders. If she was Multi, her sensors she has instead of ears would lower too. “But, I mean, it’s Onii-chan, and he made sure to do all that lewd stuff *after* killing me. So I’m not really mad.”

“But didn’t you hate it?”

“Nuh-uh,” Sana shook her head. “It made me happy.”

“Gross.”

“Why?”

“You should have just followed my recommendation and gotten killed by me. Then none of this mess would have happened.”

“That’s the last thing I would want,” Sana plucked her lips. “I mean, I don’t want to die.”

“But ultimately you’re dead anyway in the eyes of the law. They even held a funeral for you.”

“Hmm. True, I died…yeah,” she said while thinking. “Souji-onii-chan told me that he would take me somewhere safe, somewhere without Kimihiko. That we could then run away together. But I didn’t wish for any of that.”

“Run away?” I almost laughed. “Souji can’t leave Kimihiko’s body, you know? They’re Jekyll and Hyde. Where was he planning to go?”

“I don’t know,” she casually answered.

“So, what will you do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t start living in Kimihiko’s apartment, can you? Souji…I mean Kimihiko won’t be there anymore.”

“We can say I resurrected like the Christ, that should take care of it.”

“Moron.”

“How about: Actually I was still alive! I mean, that’s what happened.”

Sana suggested while looking out the window.

“You died and were cremated. You can’t pull a Tom Sawyer at this point.”

“Oh…right. I forgot.”

Sana muttered, sounding sad. I didn’t understand why she was sad. That’s because I didn’t feel any need to look at or evaluate people from an objective viewpoint.

“If you came out now there would be a huge panic about whose corpse was actually cremated.” We finally left the narrow, sinuous path and came out on a national road. I stayed behind a truck that had stopped at a red light. “…I bet Junichirou was behind it, wasn’t he?”

Junichirou was the name of the robot-crazed eldest son. He works at a laboratory that researched better ways to manufacture robots (in my opinion the problem lies in the consciousness aspect) and worked on stuff shady enough to rival Shocker Secret Society.[34] I knew that…no, that’s not right, that was still within the bounds of what everyone knew. How were these called again? Dirty rumors?

“Woah, you’re right,” Sana took her eyes off the window and glanced at my expression in the mirror. “So you saw through it?”

---

[34] The international terrorist organization acting as the main antagonist in the drama Kamen Rider.

"Obviously. Or can you name another place capable of delivering a spare of you? Geez... Still, every last one of them just can't say no to their little sister, huh. Our family's men are all like Touya-kun.[35]"

"Onee-chan," Sana leaned her body through the space between the two front seats. "What did you say just now?"

"I'm driving. Step back, it's dangerous."

"What did you say just now?

"Our family's men are all like Touya-kun..."

"No. Before that."

"Or can you name another place capable of delivering a spare of you?"

"...You knew about that too?"

Sana looked at me with her big eyes.

"You can't hide anything from me. I know everything. Well, that's a lie," the light turned green. I slowly accelerated. "The Sana that Kimihiko killed in front of the park's toilet was a spare of you, right? How many does that make?"

"I am me."

Sana backed down to the backseats, gave that answer, and wore a mechanical smile.

"Anyway, you can't appear in public anymore." I tried to change the topic. "I hope you understand that."

"Ehh. Then what should I do without even a family register? Are you abandoning me on the streets at my age?"

"Well, we can talk about the details later. Stay at my apartment for now."

"Thanks. But...isn't that also dangerous?"

True. This mess had informed Ketouin Hiroyuki of my identity. Staying at my apartment would be suicidal.

"...We'll escape to Okinawa or some other place, then." I was a bit serious. "How about flying to the Amami Islands?"

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[35] Kinomoto Touya from *Cardcaptor Sakura*, and Sakura's older brother.

“I want to go to Canada.”

“Don’t be so demanding.”

“Onee-chan, do you think you can keep up your work?”

“My work? You mean my doujin?”

“No. As Jack the Stabber.”

“Ah.”

No way.

Ketouin was on the lookout. If I killed anyone, he would use that to locate me. I mean, Asumi would have probably reported me to the police by then. I will be put on a wanted list. Goodbye, Multi. Goodbye, Sakura-chan. Until the day we can meet again.

Then…it looked like I would have to look after Sana. I had to seriously think of an escape plan to Okinawa (or Canada?). I’d need to take from my savings. How much did I have left aga—

“Hey, Sana,” I suddenly thought of something and asked Sana, who had mistaken the boring night scenery for an aquarium’s tank. “Are you really the original Kagami Sana?”

“Huh? What is it now?”

Sana was bewildered.

“Kimihiko isn’t the only one who wouldn’t like you to be damaged goods. There’s also that dumbass Souji.”

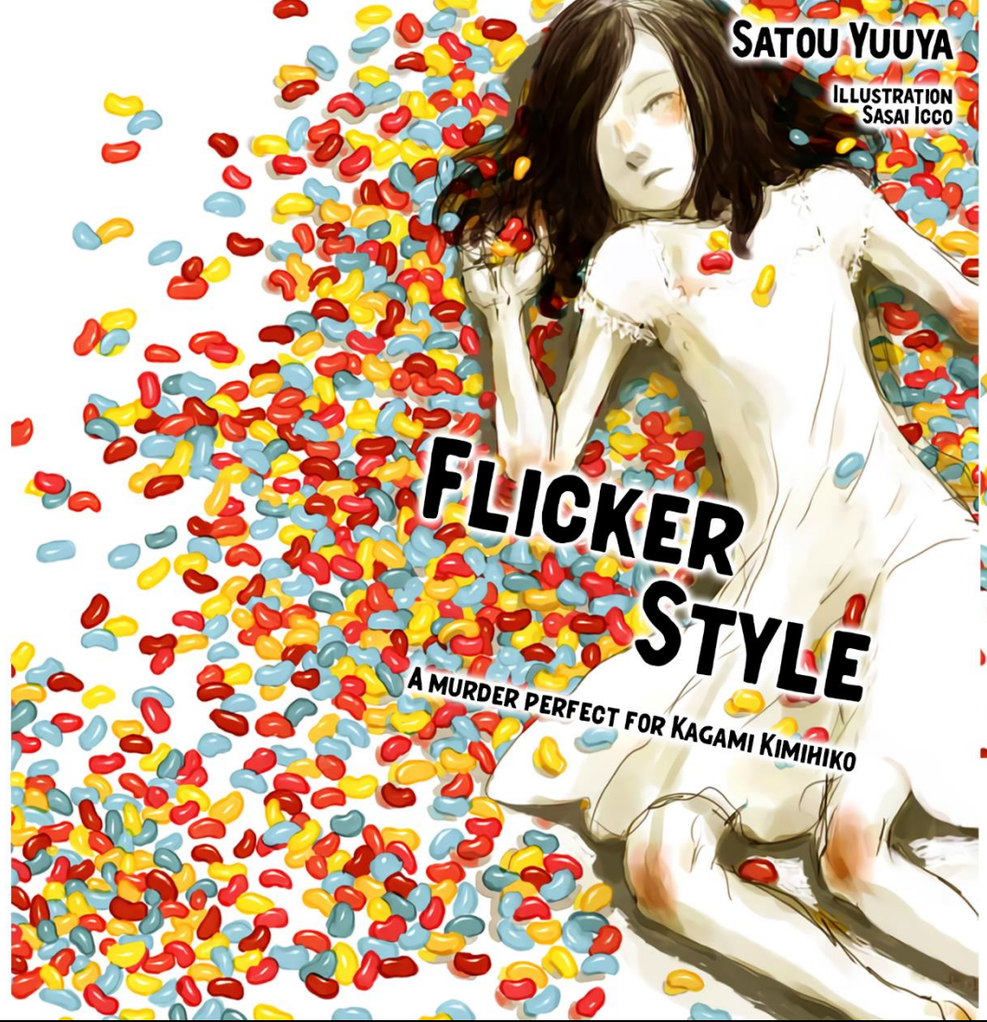
“What are you talking about?”

“In short,” I pushed my brain’s throttle to the max to put my thoughts together. “The Sana Kimihiko killed, so the one standing in front of the park was the real one—the original, and you are the spare Sana…”

“Who cares which I am,” a truly simple answer came from the back of the car. “I am still me. I already said it earlier.”

“Well…I guess. You have a point,” I nodded. Indeed, no matter the form, Kagami Sana was Kagami Sana. One shouldn’t wish for more than that. That’s good enough. Persuading myself that was the case was the most peaceful solution. “Tell me, Sana, whose child is inside your belly?”

“Onii-chan’s.”



THIS BOOK IS PERFECT FOR PEOPLE WHO SAY "AHH! ONII-CHA~N" (JK).

SWAY TRANSLATIONS

FLICKER STYLE

A MURDER PERFECT FOR KAGAMI KIMIHIKO

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My sister died. It was a suicide.
At least that's what my crazy family said.
But a man then appeared before me, a video tape in hand.
It was a recording of her being raped.
He handed me extremely detailed notes
About the rapists' dear daughters.
That only left me with one option.
That was the natural flow of things.
And so, I started kidnapping these girls.
At the end of the tunnel...
The only thing waiting for me
Was a messed up world I could never have expected.

I am ill. But I cannot seek advice from anyone.
I cannot tell anyone.
The serial killer Jack the Stabber
To which 77 girls have already fallen prey to.
Every time he kills a girl...
My vision connects to his.
I'm scared. I can't bear it. Not to mention,
He knows about me.
And so, I decided to face him.
Beyond the horizon.

Satou Yuuya

Novelist. Born in 1980. Debuted in 2001 as the 21st winner of the Mephisto Prize with *Flicker Style: A Murder Perfect for Kagami Kimihiko*. In 2007 he won the Mishima Yukio Prize with *1000 Novels and Backbeard*. In recent years he has been mainly writing in the field of pure literature. His works include: *Nocturne For the Ocean of Stars*. The Danganronpa Togami Series. The Reincarnation! Dazai Osamu Series. *Dendera*. and *Bedside Murder Case*. among others.

Sasai Icco

Illustrator. Born in 1975. His colorful and brilliantly-designed illustrations depicting a decadent innocent have adorned many book covers. ranging from mystery novels to children's books. Notable works include: Satou Yuuya's entire Kagami Saga. starting from *Flicker Style: A Murder Perfect for Kagami Kimihiko*. Ootsuka Eiji's *Multiple personality Detective Psycho REAL*. Tsujimura Mizuki's *The Children Play With the Night*. and Atsukawa Tatsumi's *Great Detectives Don't Tell Lies*. among others. He passed away in 2018.

Art BY SASAI ICCO